ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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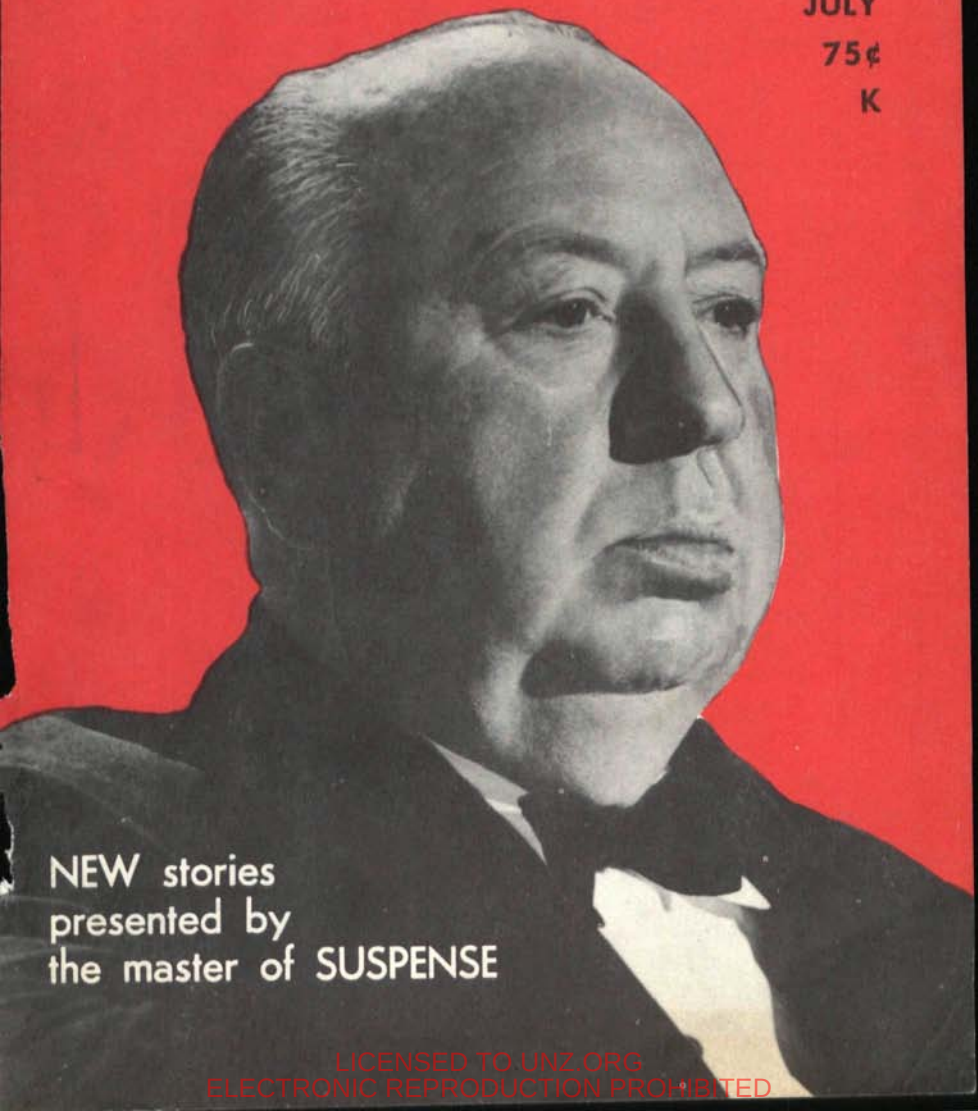

NEW stories
presented by
the master of SUSPENSE

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July 1972

Dear Reader:

Welcome to the latest monthly issue of the portable Alfred Hitchcock. If I were to regale you in person with bizarre tales designed to make the long days short, I could hope to do no better than the expertise demonstrated by the authors within. (Too, since the original edition of A.H. would require its own van, I am sure you will agree that this easy-to-carry form you now hold is much more practical.)

So it is that I am aided and abetted in my search for the best of the new mystery and suspense by such as C. B. Gilford, with *Frightened Lady*, to Michael Collins, whose latest Dan Fortune story, *Long Shot*, is this month's novelette, with many more popular writers filling these pages.

You may wish to take me, in the convenient form of this magazine, on your vacation jaunts. Though it may prove most effective on dark, stormy nights, it is a boon companion when all others fail, at any time of day.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 17, NO. 7 JULY 1972

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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If one would reason as Epictetus: "To a reasonable creature, that alone is insupportable which is unreasonable; but everything reasonable may be supported."

Frightened Lady

NOEL TASKER learned about the murder when he arrived home from the office. That was about five-forty-five on Tuesday. He drove through the entrance of Camelot Court and took the left drive. The right drive was his own, but he often took the left in order to pass by Gaby's apartment. Not that he would ever dare to stop in during daylight hours, but perhaps only to see if her car were there, or maybe, as had happened once, to see a man escorting her out the door. Despite the fact that he didn't own Gaby—and she had reminded him of that often—the experience had caused him a pang of jealousy. Masochistically, he continued to check on her now and then.

The sight which greeted him on this Tuesday, however, was not of Gaby's being escorted to a shiny new foreign sports car. There were four vehicles parked before her door today, three police cruisers and a white ambulance; and there was a crowd on the green lawn.

Noel Tasker braked to a quick

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stop, not wisely perhaps, but instinctively. That was Gaby's door standing wide open, with a policeman just outside it to fend off the crowd. He leaped from the car, then realized it was not his place to show such concern, and sauntered over to join the crowd.

"What's going on?" he asked the nearest man.

"There's been a murder."

Noel began to shake. He hoped the fact wasn't noticeable to his neighbor. The next question was infinitely more difficult. "Who was it?"

"A woman. I think her name was Marchant."

Gabrielle Marchant! His Gaby!

He was sick. He wanted to run, to find a private corner somewhere where he could let go, but also he wanted to stay there. He wanted to find out . . . the answers to a million questions. What had happened? Who had done it? A crazy thought ran through his head, of going up to the policeman at the door and saying, "Let me in, Officer. I was the dead woman's lover; one of her lovers, I mean."

Now his thoughts went pell-mell. *One* of her lovers! That guy he had seen picking up Gaby, taking her out in his fancy, expensive, foreign car. He ought to tell the police about that guy. He was probably the one who killed her! Describe the guy, describe the car . . .

"I hear she was good-looking." The man beside him was continuing the conversation.

"Yes . . ." Noel answered absently.

"You knew her?"

"Well, I . . ."

He stopped. Another thought was seeping into his reeling brain. If Gabrielle Marchant was suddenly murdered, *all* her lovers would be suspect, wouldn't they? Not that Noel Tasker was in any way implicated in her death; but now that she was dead, he didn't want to be implicated in her *life.*

"You knew her?"

"Well, I—I knew who she was."

"You've seen her?"

"Well, yes."

"Good-looking?"

"Well, depends. Depends on

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what you like. I guess she was, sort of."

He walked away from the man, who could have been a plainclothes detective, or a busybody sort who might report to the cops that he was talking to someone who acted very upset and nervous. So Noel returned to his car and drove away because now he was no longer mourning for the loss of Gaby, or shocked at her death. He was frightened.

He wheeled around the police cars and the ambulance, trying to go slowly, trying not to attract attention. He drove all the way to the far end, then back again on his own street, and parked in his own carport. The adjacent spot was empty. Leona hadn't arrived yet. He was thankful for that.

Once inside his own apartment, he felt a little better, but he was still shaking. He fixed himself a drink, heavy on the bourbon, easy on the soda. His hands trembled through the operation. He took a long swallow, then carried the rest of it into the bedroom. There he yanked off his jacket and tie. Afterward, though he didn't want to, he walked to the window.

There was only one thing out there on the rear lawn to suggest that there might be something wrong in Gabrielle's apartment—a cop; a uniformed cop standing at the rear door—just standing there. Maybe he was guarding the door, but there was no crowd in the rear; all the activity was out front.

Noel sipped at his drink, hoping to quiet the trembling in his hands. The view out this window was too painfully familiar, but he stayed there nevertheless, staring.

It had been while standing at this window that he'd first seen Gaby. She had moved in last spring, and on the first sunshiny day she had appeared. What was the distance between the two buildings, between the window where he stood now, and Gaby's back door? Two hundred feet? Maybe a little more, but the view had been good.

Gaby had come out that day to begin her summer tan, wearing one of the tiniest bikinis Noel Tasker had ever seen. Gaby had the figure for it: legs long, graceful, so aware of their own perfection that they seemed to be posing; a slim waistline that emphasized the curves above and below; a bust that bulged out of the little bra. She arranged herself on a chaise longue, and Noel Tasker stared.

Through the months of May and June, he continued to stare, whenever Gaby was out there on the lawn and Leona was absent from the apartment. He even bought binoculars to achieve a more intimate view, and hid the instrument in his

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briefcase, a place where Leona never peeked. During May and June, the sunbather's skin changed from creamy ivory to creamy golden.

In July, Noel became Gaby's lover.

It hadn't been easy to manage—nor difficult. He had observed her living habits, clocked her movements, and so was driving by one morning when she'd had car trouble and was able to give her a lift downtown. Afterward there'd been a "chance" meeting at the office where she worked, followed by cocktails the same afternoon; then two dinner dates, and finally, by appropriate degrees and the passage of time, home to bed.

All very discreet. His job had always demanded his being away a few evenings, calling on clients, attending a meeting now and then. The evenings out had become merely a bit more frequent. Leona had something of an after-dark life of her own. She was a secretary, and a very good one, with an income that topped Noel's whenever his sales slipped, as they often did. So she had nightwork occasionally, and the businesswomen's club she belonged to, and her duplicate bridge. Thus it hadn't been too hard for Noel to see Gaby a couple of evenings a week.

Poor Gaby, so beautiful and yet so undemanding; though a divorcée, she hadn't been looking for a husband, or even strings. Because she was beautiful, she had plenty of men. All Gaby had ever seemed to want was a good time. Who could have wanted to kill her?

Noel finished his drink and fixed himself another. It was six-fifteen now and Leona wasn't home yet. Was she supposed to be on time tonight or was she staying downtown? His mind was blank. He couldn't remember.

Miserable, he drank and waited. He couldn't quite believe or accept the new fact yet. Gaby was dead. Her beautiful body had been . . . what? Shot? Strangled? Knifed? Did it really matter? The beautiful body was dead, destroyed. There would be no more of those stolen hours together, no more excitement, no more ecstasy. It wasn't fair! He'd had such a good thing going, and someone . . . someone . . .

The sound of a key in the door lock spun him around. He mustn't be caught staring out this window! Force of habit, as if poor Gaby were out there sunning. He ran from the window and was back in the livingroom when Leona walked in.

He guessed instantly that she already knew about the excitement in the neighborhood. She was pale, flustered, which was unusual for

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her. She stared at him. She was even trembling. That was fortunate in a way. Perhaps she wouldn't notice his symptoms.

"A woman was murdered on the other street," she announced.

Not seeming to care whether or not he already knew, she passed him and marched into the bedroom. He watched her go. She always marched. She'd grown stout and matronly, and the martial stride seemed to fit her. He followed her after a moment. There she was, at *his* window, the window through which he had watched Gaby.

"A woman named Gabrielle something . . ."

He said nothing. He wasn't going to be so foolish as to furnish the last name.

"It must have been pretty terrible. They say it was a maniac. She was all cut up."

He bit hard into his lower lip, and steadied himself against the doorjamb. The images pounding into his brain were red and horrible, but somehow he had already guessed. Gaby was no ordinary woman. She would have been murdered in no ordinary way. Cut up! He who had known her body so intimately could visualize the grimmest interpretation of those words.

"It must have been a sex maniac," Leona said. Suddenly she turned from the window and confronted him. "She used to sunbathe out there. Did you ever see her?"

He sensed the danger and reacted. Gaby was dead. He had to protect himself. Every man who had a window overlooking that lawn must have seen her. Not to have noticed her would be suspicious in itself. "I remember a sexy gal, if it was the same one. A brunette?"

Leona nodded. "I think she was a brunette."

He swallowed hard. He could scarcely change the subject and ask what was for dinner. "Cut up, you say? You mean . . . ?"

"Sliced. With something real sharp. Maybe a razor." She staggered suddenly to the bed and sat. "A sex maniac, Noel," she whispered. "There's a sex maniac loose in this neighborhood."

That night was a strange one. The August dusk was redolent with the scents of chrysanthemums and of terror, full of the sounds of cicadas and soft human conversation. The inhabitants of Camelot Court gathered outside in groups, which seemed safer than being alone inside, and rumors were rife.

The corpse had been taken away, thoroughly sheeted, of course, but covered, as everyone knew, with ghastly wounds. The crime had been discovered by a woman

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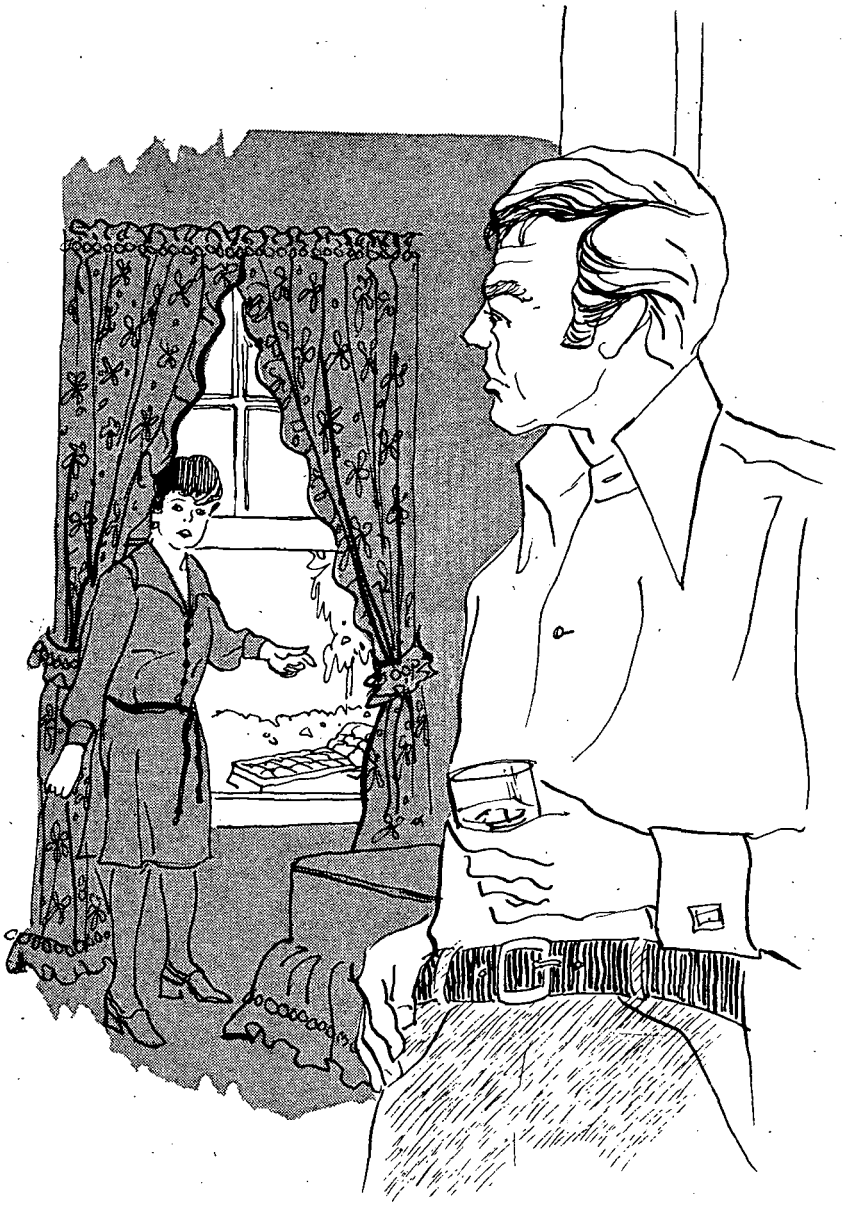

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named Maxine Borley, who lived across the hall and who'd been, apparently, Gabrielle's only female friend. Maxine had heard the TV playing inside the Marchant apartment, had knocked, received no reply, had opened the unlocked door and walked in. Whether or not Maxine was supposed to give out details, she had: blood all over the place, the body nude, lying in the doorway between the bedroom and the livingroom; so many cuts that she couldn't count, and so much blood that it was hard to see where the cuts were. One detail was certain, however. There'd been a man's old-fashioned straight razor beside the body.

The news was passed in hushed tones up and down both streets of Camelot Court. Men shivered, women visibly trembled, and they all said what Leona had said, "There's a sex maniac loose around here."

Leona didn't want to go back into the apartment, not yet at least. The streets and walks of Camelot were well-lighted, and for the moment there seemed to be safety in numbers outside. She hung tightly onto Noel's arm as they walked about. Women generally stayed close to their husbands. Mostly there were couples living in Camelot. If there were other single women like Gabrielle Marchant, they weren't in evidence on this night.

Whenever neighbors met, they always talked about the same things. Gabrielle Marchant had had boyfriends, lovers. A disappointed lover could have killed her. *Could* have. But why, then, the butchery? If he'd had to use a razor, one slice across the throat would have been sufficient—unless he were insane. Had Gabrielle Marchant been beautiful enough to drive one of her lovers insane? Possibly. She'd been sexy, all right, and she'd displayed herself pretty freely out on the lawn and by the pool. So the murder could also have been committed by a stranger. Why necessarily a stranger? Why not some frustrated guy who lived in Camelot? A maniac *inside* Camelot? That, of course, was the most frightening possibility of all, because, as every woman seemed aware, a maniac might kill again.

Eventually the impromptu group discussions had to break up, people had to get their sleep. The maniac wouldn't strike again tonight. The place was crawling with cops. The Marchant apartment was sealed off, guarded by the police. Police cruisers came and went frequently. Somebody said plainclothesmen were roaming. Certain of Gabrielle's immediate neighbors had already been questioned. There

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were reporters around, too, who also asked questions. Too many alert people were around tonight; not a good night for a murderer to prowl.

Noel and Leona went home together. Noel had a drink while Leona locked windows, closed venetian blinds, tucked draperies around their edges, wedged chairs under doorknobs front and back. In their bedroom finally, they performed the rituals of retiring.

Noel glanced covertly at his wife during the process. She was realistic enough at least not to affect slinky, transparent nightgowns. Her lavender pajamas ballooned over her heavy breasts, thick waist and generous haunches. He discovered that he couldn't even remember what she'd looked like when they were married thirteen years ago.

Could a woman like Leona really be in danger from the same 'sex maniac' who had murdered Gaby? It seemed impossible. Sex maniacs would have certain standards. They obviously enjoyed murdering women, but judging from the choice of Gaby, such maniacs must prefer murdering beautiful women.

When Noel and Leona climbed into bed, with Noel suddenly wondering why after all these years they still slept together in a double bed, Leona snuggled up close. "Noel," she whispered, "I'm scared," and she proved it by trembling violently. "You will protect me, won't you, Noel?"

"Yes," he promised, though he didn't mean it even then. "I'll protect you."

The next morning Lieutenant Kabrick of Homicide arrived. He was a squat, square man, powerful-looking as a bear. He didn't smile, merely nodded and showed his identification.

"You must be Mr. Tasker."

"Yes."

"May I come in?"

Noel stepped aside.

"Mrs. Tasker at home?"

"She just left for work."

"Maybe I can catch her later. While I'm here, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Questions?" Despite gritted teeth and clenched fists, Noel's trembling started again.

"About the murder of Gabrielle Marchant." The lieutenant seemed not to notice the trembling. "Did you know Miss Marchant?"

The question Noel had realized would come eventually, the question he dreaded; he had thought of a dozen answers, none of which he liked particularly, but he had to say something. "Not exactly know . . ."

"What does that mean, Mr. Tasker?"

"Well, I can't say that I knew

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her. But I . . . Well, I guess like everybody else, I—I knew who she was."

"How was that?"

"Well, I—I saw her . . . from a distance . . . outdoors . . . several times, I guess."

The lieutenant stared enigmatically, then nodded. "Can I look around?"

"You mean . . . search?"

The stare continued, unblinking. "I just wanted to see what view of the Marchant apartment you have from here."

"Oh." Noel didn't know whether to feel relieved or not. He led the way into the bedroom, pulled up the blind.

The lieutenant stood at the window for a long time. "Good view you had here," he said.

"Yes, my wife and I appreciate the open space."

"They tell me Miss Marchant was a sunbather."

Noel made no comment.

"Those several times you said you saw her, Mr. Tasker, must have been when she was sunbathing."

"Yes, I guess so."

"You don't remember that well? They tell me she was rather spectacular."

"Well, it's some distance . . ."

"A couple hundred feet, I'd say." The lieutenant turned away from the window. "I suppose you read about the case in the paper this morning."

"Yes."

"Well, like it said, although the body wasn't discovered until Tuesday afternoon, we're certain that the crime was committed on Monday evening. Between nine and eleven p.m. is what the doc says. There was no forcible entry. The murderer just rang the doorbell; probably the front door, but maybe it was the back door. That's why I'm here, Mr. Tasker. I wanted to find out whether you or your wife saw anything strange in the vicinity of the Marchant apartment on Monday night."

"I wasn't here!" Noel was bursting to reveal his alibi. Even if they connected him with Gaby otherwise, they couldn't pin the murder on him. "I didn't come home at all. Monday. I mean, I didn't come home until real late. It was a lot later than eleven. Maybe one or one-thirty. We had a dinner and a sales meeting, and afterward I had some drinks with a couple of guys."

Lieutenant Kabrick nodded slowly. "Okay, Mr. Tasker, so you didn't see anything. How about your wife?"

"I don't know."

"Was she home?"

"She didn't say. Sometimes when I'm not going to be here for dinner, she eats out, too. I think maybe

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that's what she did. But I don't know what time she got home."

"If she had noticed anything peculiar, she'd probably have mentioned it to you, I guess. Everybody around here has been very cooperative. They want to find the killer."

Noel tried to stay calm. It wasn't easy. "I don't know what we could have seen if we'd been home," he said. "It's pretty far away, and it was dark."

The lieutenant nodded. "But you never can tell," he said. "That's why we're asking everybody here in the complex. And of course, maybe we ought to be interested in other times besides Monday night. The fact there was no forcible entry into the apartment doesn't prove anything, but it's possible that the murder was committed by someone known to Miss Marchant. This will come out in the papers maybe later today, Mr. Tasker, but the medical examination didn't indicate rape."

Noel started. "Then it wasn't a sex murder?"

"I didn't say that. There are all different kinds of sex murders. But it doesn't seem to have been a rape-murder. I've got a little theory on it myself. Maybe it was a revenge murder."

"Revenge?" Noel stuffed his hands into his pockets to hide their trembling.

"Like, maybe, a jealous lover. Or a rejected lover. Miss Marchant was attractive. We don't know how many men there were in her life. So that's why I'm asking you about other times besides Monday evening. Did you ever notice what people came and went over across the way? We're trying to find out what men hung around Miss Marchant."

The guy in the expensive foreign car! Would it be smart to mention that incident? To admit that he had deliberately driven down the other street and noticed the guy? Stay out of it, Noel told himself. Stay far out.

"Can you give us any information along that line, Mr. Tasker?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

The lieutenant shrugged. "Well, thanks, Mr. Tasker," he said on his way out. "Tell your wife I may stop by. And also tell her not to worry. We'll catch the guy. We've gone over the place for prints, and we've lifted quite a few. Some of them may have been left by the murderer."

When the lieutenant had gone, Noel sank onto the sofa. Fingerprints! He hadn't thought about fingerprints. His own would be all over Gaby's apartment . . .

He spent the day worrying about fingerprinting, and then that evening his worries were suddenly over. The story appeared in the newspaper, either deliberately

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leaked by the police for purposes of their own, or uncovered by an enterprising reporter. A most important fingerprint had been found in the Marchant apartment. Since the print did not belong to the deceased, it had to belong to the murderer. Who else but the murderer, since it was imprinted on the murder weapon, and in blood?

So whatever other strange prints they found around the apartment, they wouldn't even bother to check them, would they? Everybody's apartment must be full of fingerprints. People come and go. Even in and out of bedrooms? Of course, innocently. But it didn't matter. The police had a print of Gaby's murderer now, and that would be the only one they'd check out thoroughly, through the F.B.I. files in Washington, or however they did it.

Noel felt so relieved that he wanted to talk about the case now, and the only person he had to talk to was Leona. He showed her the newspaper the moment she arrived home.

"They'll catch that maniac now," he announced. "The police found a bloody fingerprint on the razor."

Leona grabbed the paper and read it without bothering to sit down. Was she actually frightened by all this murder business? Or was she pretending? Do unattractive women like to pretend they're desirable, even to a homicidal maniac?

"Well," she said finally, "they'll catch him now. They've got a fingerprint of him. Then we can all relax." She went to the kitchen, transferred TV dinners from the freezer to the oven, and afterward retired to the bedroom. He didn't follow her there. After Gaby, the sight of Leona's changing clothes had become rather an obscene spectacle.

Then, just before the TV dinners were ready, Lieutenant Kabrick arrived, and it was a different Noel Tasker who received him this time. Gaby was gone, the moments of ecstasy would be no more; but Noel Tasker was alive and safe, and now he was confident.

"Lieutenant," he fairly bubbled, "you came to see my wife, didn't you? Honey, the detective's here! Sit down, Lieutenant. Read all about it in the paper—the bloody fingerprint on the razor. Have you located the matching print in your files yet?"

Kabrick sat down, tentatively, on the edge of a chair. "No, I'm afraid not," he said.

Leona came in, wearing Bermuda shorts. She didn't look good in them. Kabrick rose politely, anyway, and introduced himself.

"Mrs. Tasker, were you at home Monday night? We're canvassing to

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see if any of the neighbors noticed anything or anybody around the Marchant apartment that night."

"I wasn't home," Leona answered quickly, and by remaining standing made the lieutenant stand too.

"When did you get home, Mrs. Tasker?"

"It must have been midnight." She trembled. "And to think I drove in here, and parked my car, and walked to my door . . . and there was a maniac hanging around . . ."

"We think he was gone by then, Mrs. Tasker."

"Lieutenant," Noel interrupted, "sit down. Care for a drink? Cup of coffee?"

Kabrick refused both, but he did sit down. Leona sat on the sofa.

"I guess if you're still asking questions," she ventured softly, "that means you haven't caught the man yet."

"Not yet."

"Then no woman is safe."

The lieutenant shrugged. "We go on the assumption," he said, "that no woman is ever safe. The world is full of nuts. But that doesn't mean that this murderer will strike again. He may have been a friend of Miss Marchant, you see, and may have killed for revenge or jealousy."

Again Noel was tempted to mention the guy with the foreign car, but he resisted. He was out of it now, and he wanted to stay out.

"There was no rape involved," Kabrick pointed out, "and probably not even attempted rape. You see, we're convinced that Miss Marchant was attacked from behind."

"Behind?" Noel echoed, really curious. "With a razor?"

"Very simple," Kabrick explained. "Miss Marchant was a small woman, short, about five-one. That made this method of attack easy. The murderer was right-handed, we believe. Standing behind Miss Marchant, he reached over her left shoulder, cupped her chin in the palm of his left hand, forced her chin upward, bringing her head back, and tightened her neck. Then with his right hand he reached across her right shoulder and simply drew the razor across her throat. Somehow that M.O. suggests deliberation to me. I don't go with the maniac theory. So the other women around here may be safer than you think, Mrs. Tasker."

Leona didn't give up. She wanted to feel that she was in danger, Noel felt certain, because she wanted to feel desirable. "He cut her all up, though," she argued. "Only a maniac would do that."

"The body was mutilated after she was dead," Kabrick said. He sat back farther in his chair and surveyed both his listeners. "I could be

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wrong, of course," he went on. "I'm always theorizing, but in Homicide you have to. There's this matter of the blood. You know what M.O. means, Mr. Tasker?"

"Modus operandi," Noel answered confidently.

"That's right. The criminal's method of operation. The way he commits the crime. Now, what are the advantages of attacking the victim from behind in a razor murder?"

Noel thought. "Surprise?"

"Maybe. And the victim has less chance to protect herself with her arms. You can get right to the vital spot. But there's another advantage. The murderer doesn't get too much blood on himself."

"Really?" Noel asked in admiration.

"That's a very important advantage. It minimizes the problem of disposal of bloody garments. Which can be quite a problem. Plenty of murders have been solved by the discovery of bloody clothes."

"But Miss Marchant was cut up," Noel objected. "The woman who discovered the body said there was blood all over the place."

Lieutenant Kabrick slouched in the depths of the chair and smiled. "There was and there wasn't," he said. "Now, let's say Miss Marchant is dead from a cut throat. She's lying more or less faceup on the floor. Only one cut so far. There's a lot of blood, mostly on the front of the corpse. And on the razor and the murderer's hands, of course. But now the victim is dead, quiet, easy to cut on. From here on, the murderer can proceed very carefully, avoid getting blood on himself. You see, there was one very peculiar fact. Although there's blood on the carpet in nearly every direction, there are no footprints in the blood. Wouldn't you say the murderer was being very, very careful?"

"Seems so," Noel admitted.

"Now tell me," Kabrick pursued, "what kind of maniac do we have, then? One seized with blood lust, who wants to cut and cut, who wants to mutilate, to butcher? Yes, all that. In a sense, every murderer is a maniac. But this is one who has other things on his mind, too. Like the problems of disposal of bloody clothes and bloody shoes."

Noel was calm now, completely absorbed. "What about the bloody fingerprint on the razor?" he demanded.

"Two explanations. Remember, no killer is completely sane. Explanation one, then: he deliberately wanted to leave a clue to his identity for the thrill of the risk involved. Explanation two: he saw something, heard something, got scared, and ran, before he was quite finished. Although there were plenty of slashes, incidentally, the

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job did look a little unfinished. Maybe that sounds strange, but I've seen quite a few of these cases—" Kabrick broke off suddenly, glanced at his watch, and stood up. "Maybe I got too graphic," he said to Leona. "What I really wanted to do was to make you feel a little better, a little safer maybe. Because I think that killer was interested in only one woman."

He walked to the door. "If at any time either of you does remember any little item about Miss Marchant, whether it seems important to you or not, I hope you'll let us know."

The detective was gone, but Leona continued to sit there, pale, shivering, staring at nothing.

"What's the matter?" Noel asked. Perhaps he was beginning to enjoy her fear, now that his own was past.

"I'm afraid," she said.

He smiled indulgently. What reason did she have to be afraid? Who would want to murder her? Only himself, her husband, and even he didn't have any special reason to do it at the moment.

Life, however, has a way of changing. The best-laid plans and all that. For Noel Tasker, who didn't have any plans, best-laid or otherwise, things could still go awry.

Lieutenant Kabrick and his cohorts did not bring the murderer of Gabrielle Marchant to justice. The police, it was said, did a thorough job on the Marchant apartment, ripping, so the rumor went, the paper from the walls and the carpeting from the floors, to no avail. They gave up finally, and disappeared from the scene. The management of Camelot Court didn't try to rent the redecorated apartment apparently. They were too busy trying to fill their other vacancies. Nervous renters drifted away when leases expired. Other nervous renters stayed, among them Leona Tasker, seeming to enjoy the little tremors of apprehension which went up and down their spines whenever they had to walk through the dusk and night of advancing autumn. The tremors all the more enjoyable being experienced in safety. The killer did not strike again.

Noel Tasker, who possessed enough masculine animal vitality to have interested the likes of Gabrielle Marchant, somehow lacked the moxie to achieve very much in the world of commerce. His business career went from bad to worse. His customers fell to the blandishments of competitors. His boss kept him on, but cut his drawing account and issued vague threats. Noel considered trying to find another mistress to fill the emptiness in his life,

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but discovered with dismay he couldn't afford the luxury. He remembered Gaby, who had never demanded much, and he brooded.

To Leona, however, although she might continue to cringe in mock terror at the thought of the lurking maniac, life down at the office was kinder. She received a promotion, a minor executive title, rather unusual for a female.

"Do you get a company car?" Noel sniped at her when she told him the news. His own company car, he knew, might be taken away from him any day.

"No," she admitted, "but my other fringe benefits have been increased. I've got fifty thousand dollars' worth of company-paid life insurance now."

It became only a matter of time, therefore, before Noel Tasker steeled himself to the obvious decision. Time, meanwhile, was running out.

He didn't know how long he could hang onto his own job. An unemployed man with a wife insured to the tune of fifty thousand bucks might look just a little too suspicious. Then also, his job, with all the night work it entailed, was his only source of alibis.

The 'maniac' had not been as obliging as he might have been. When he failed to commit further crimes, Lieutenant Kabrick's theories of revenge and jealousy gained strength. Even worse, the women of Camelot Court were ceasing to be terrified, Leona included.

Oh, they played the little game as long as they could, especially when a bunch of them were together; half a dozen thirtyish and fortyish females, some past their prime, some never having had any, all cackling about how the killer could be hiding in any shadow, ogling their charms, and lusting to slice those charms like so much baloney. Baloney indeed!

So it would be a favor to those old hags to give a new little boost to their adrenalin production. Actually, the hags were rather important to Noel's plan. They would be sure to testify, when the time came, that Leona Tasker had been for months deathly afraid of the fate which eventually befell her.

M.O. Noel had it memorized. Lieutenant Kabrick had been most obliging; the newspapers too. Everybody knew the M.O., and they'd recognize it when they saw it again. Too bad about the lieutenant's theories. He'd have to change his mind.

The straight razor was easy to obtain. Noel picked one up on an out-of-town trip. There'd have to be one difference about the razor, though. There'd be no bloody fingerprint on it this time. But then

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the M.O. is not always precisely the same, is it? A criminal, even a maniac, learns as he goes along.

The worst risk involved the alibi. What it amounted to was simple: he had to be in two places at the same time. Not easy, perhaps, if one is supposed to be at dinner with a single customer and at home with one's wife simultaneously. But what about a larger social occasion, where one might slip away for a few minutes without the absence being noted, and yet where a dozen half-inebriated witnesses might swear that, "Sure, old Noel was here with us all evening"?

Life cooperated with Noel Tasker on this one score. A business convention was coming to town.

"Are you going to be home on Thursday night?" he asked Leona.

"Why shouldn't I be?" she asked him. Her persistent terror had reduced her out-alone-after-dark activities. "I suppose you'll be at your old convention party. Well, I'll be here watching TV."

Thursday night it would be, then.

Qualms? Still? Right down to the wire? Oh, yes, indeed, but the choice was inevitable—and bitter.

On the one hand, he could continue as he was. Losing his present selling job, he might of course get another; such as selling encyclopedias from door to door, for instance. Leona could support him—and become more and more possessive of him, more and more demanding. Ever since the Marchant murder, under the pretense of being afraid, she had required more affection, snuggling a bit closer every night in bed, and on Saturday and Sunday mornings lingering there for a bit of dalliance. After Gaby, he could endure Leona even less.

But with fifty thousand, plus their joint savings account, he could go somewhere else, start over. Maybe fifty thousand wouldn't last forever, maybe he'd eventually be back in the same bind he was in now; but fifty thousand would buy a lot of

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time, and somewhere along the route he might pick up another Gaby. Hell, he didn't have to plan all the way to his old age. More important was to enjoy the little bit of youth he had left.

Was there really any choice?

Thursday night it had to be.

At the convention-opening banquet on Thursday evening, Noel Tasker tried to impress his presence upon as many conventioneers as he possibly could. He slapped backs, pumped hands, told jokes. Also he pretended to drink—but only pretended. He stayed cold-sober.

The dinner dragged on, his nerves frayed, but nobody noticed such details. He hung on grimly. Afterward there were cigars, and much milling about. Then, finally, the time he was waiting for: the chairs and seating arrangements all got a bit confused because the lights went out, a special forty-five-minute film on new developments in the industry. He had forty-five minutes, therefore, of invisibility.

Only a waiter or two could have observed his exit. He didn't use an elevator. He had parked in the street, so no parking attendant was involved. He drove home in twelve minutes. No one, he was fairly certain, observed his arrival in Camelot Court. Now that it was autumn, people stayed indoors, never noticed the comings and goings of their neighbors.

Only Leona welcomed him, rather amazed. She was attired in nightie and robe, with her dyed black hair in curlers—but she smiled at him.

"What are you doing home so early?" she asked.

"It was boring," he said.

She didn't question that.

He went into the bedroom and disrobed. When he emerged again, stark naked, with one hand, the right hand, the razor hand, behind his back, she did have a question. "Noel, what on earth?"

He smiled. He shrugged. "I told you it was boring at the dinner. I thought there might be something more interesting here." He had to get her off that sofa, to maneuver her into the required position.

"Noel! You've had too much to drink!"

He shook his head.

"A girl must have jumped out of the cake—"

"And gave me ideas? Maybe that was it." The seconds and minutes were ticking away, and she was playing coy, taking her time. "How about it, Leona?"

"I just put my hair up . . ."

"Take it down."

She slowly placed the bookmark in her book, laid the thing carefully aside—and smiled. "Noel," she said,

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"You're positively wicked tonight."

"Yes, I am," he admitted. "I'm waiting."

She rose slowly, ever so slowly. Then she paused, in the very middle of the room, and slowly . . . slowly undid the belt of her robe.

"Take it off," he invited. "The draperies are closed." They were. He had made sure of that.

She shrugged out of the robe and stood there, just in the nightie. "Shall I take this off too?" she asked, simpering.

"Why not?"

She started—and he started to slip around behind her. *How glad I am,* he thought, *that Gaby wasn't raped that night. That would have been a most difficult M.O. to stick to.*

She was halfway out of the nightie—a good situation, he decided impatiently—when he stepped to a position directly behind her, grabbed her hair, curlers and all, pulled upward and backward, and gritting his teeth in a supreme effort of will, pulled the razor across her throat.

Oh, the blood! He hadn't dreamed how far it could spurt, and he hadn't dreamed, either, how powerful a woman Leona was, or how powerful any woman, in the very process of bleeding to death, could be. She lunged sideways, trying to escape. He hung onto her hair. She fell toward the sofa, and he hung on. She grabbed for the coffee table, and he hung on. She reached for a heavy ash tray there, her hands and arms all covered with blood now. She reached for the tray . . . for a weapon? He hung on. He weighted her body down with his own. He couldn't allow her to turn on him, couldn't let her swing on him with that tray. He couldn't afford a lump on his head.

Then, when he was afraid she would never, ever succumb, she suddenly sagged. They stayed together for a moment, her head and arms on the table, he riding on her back, her life's blood pouring out, reddening the table, the ash tray, and the floor beneath. Finally—he knew it somehow—she was dead.

He wasted a precious minute, perhaps two, before he could bring himself to the next, and the most difficult, phase of the project. He'd had no appetite at the banquet, had eaten as little as possible, but now he felt ready to vomit. A horrible thought bounded around in his brain; could his vomit be analyzed and compared with the menu served at the banquet?

He rallied. The M.O. Follow it or fail. Impersonate the maniac, or let it look like a rational crime, a husband murdering his wife for a rational motive, fifty thousand dollars.

So he dragged the now inert

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body away from the table, laid it faceup on the floor. Blood still gurgled from the throat wound. The razor was bloody, his own hand was bloody—but he hadn't stepped in the stuff.

He went to work with his eyes closed, then realized he might cut himself, which would never do. Follow the M.O. He'd heard the story about precisely what had happened to Gaby. Maxine Borley, who had discovered Gaby's body, had authored the story, so it had been an eyewitness account. Now, he hoped that Maxine had gotten it straight.

Finally he was finished—except for that one item, the one slight difference in this second crime. The murderer must not leave his fingerprint on the razor. Noel could have worn gloves, of course, but then he would have had to dispose of bloody gloves. No, his way was simpler. Using a corner of Leona's nightie, he rubbed blood off the razor, dropped the weapon into a red pool, then soaked the nightie in the same pool. No crime lab could ever lift a print now off that mess.

Finally, there was himself. Lieutenant Kabrick had been so right. This particular M.O. didn't splash much blood on the murderer. His clothes were in the bedroom, of course. There were no bloody footprints; just hands and arms.

To make totally certain, he took a shower; not a leisurely shower, but thorough, including his hair. The night air would dry it. Afterward, he climbed back into his clothes. When he walked from the bedroom back through the livingroom, he didn't glance at the body on the floor.

He locked the door as he went out. Nobody saw him return to his car, get in, and drive off. In twelve minutes he reached the hotel. He was even able to park in the same spot he had vacated earlier.

The movie was just ending when he rejoined the conventioneers. Now he drank for real, slapped more backs, pumped more hands, told more jokes than he had before, but he was thinking all the time. He solicited comments about the film, and his obliging companions told him everything about the film he needed to know. Kabrick wasn't going to trick him that way.

It was late when he left the hotel. He didn't really want to leave. He would have preferred to stay there with some of the out-of-town guys, sleep on the floor or something, but he chose to go home, like a faithful, loving husband should.

He drove more slowly this time, taking about twenty minutes. He parked, walked up the path, opened the door with his key. He had left the light on, so he didn't need to flip the switch. There was

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Leona, lying just where he had left her. Good, faithful, dependable Leona.

He dialed the number of the police, and in a broken voice reported the crime.

Noel Tasker did spend the rest of that night in a hotel, after all, at Lieutenant Kabrick's suggestion, so the police investigation team could have the apartment.

Noel slept fitfully. His emotional condition was no act for the police. He really was in a state almost of shock. Committing the murder had been no easy thing.

The lieutenant found him at the hotel at eleven on Friday morning. He hadn't stirred. The lieutenant knocked, and Noel opened the door willingly.

"Leona had a right to be terrified, didn't she?" he began. "It was that same maniac, wasn't it?"

The lieutenant shrugged and sidled to a chair. "Same?" he echoed after he had sat.

Noel stared. "Wasn't it? I saw the razor."

"No prints on the razor this time," Kabrick informed him.

Deep inside, invisibly, Noel smiled. *One thing done right.*

"There were bloody prints on the coffee table and on an ash tray though."

"The killer's?"

"No, your wife's." The lieutenant glanced up. His eyes were hard, implacable. "Funny thing. We caught it right away. A print of your wife's, on the table and on the tray, matched the print on the razor in the Marchant apartment."

Noel sat on the edge of the bed, slowly, carefully. Things were beginning to spin.

"Let's talk, Mr. Tasker," the lieutenant said. "We've got a lot of things to talk about. Like maybe how your wife was the one who killed Marchant. And why she killed her. And then, finally, if your wife killed Marchant, who killed your wife? Now, Mr. Tasker, I've got a theory . . ."

Noel stopped listening. Why, why should Leona have cut Gaby's throat? He couldn't think of a reason—but perhaps it would occur to him later.

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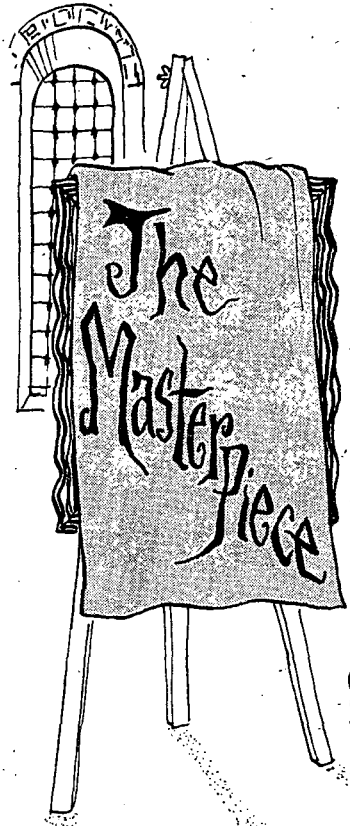
It is most fortunate that one may climb the ladder of success from either side.



The Master Piece

by Clark Howard

WENDALL ARRIVED at his London flat at seven o'clock that Friday evening. He closed the door behind him, locked it, and leaned back against it. His wife, Hester, stood in the livingroom and looked at him curiously.

"Well," she said quietly. "Did you do it?"

"Yes. I said I would, didn't I?"

"I know, but somehow I wasn't sure you'd go through with it." Hester's voice, unlike his, was beautifully British. Wendall spoke pure American.

"I went through with it," he told

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her tonelessly. He unbuttoned his raincoat, which was only slightly damp from the early fall drizzle. Opening one side of the coat, he showed Hester a cardboard mailing tube tied securely to the lining. "There it is," he said simply.

"The tie cords worked all right, then?" She had sewn them to the inside of his coat.

"Sure. I walked right out the door like this. Walked down the street to the bus stop, then ducked into a doorway and took the coat off and draped it over my arm so I could sit down on the bus. When I got off the bus, I slipped the coat on again and walked home."

"Any trouble getting the forgery into place?"

"None at all. It fit perfectly."

Wendall took the raincoat off and went into the livingroom. He spread the coat on their old coffee table and untied the cords. Removing the mailing tube, he opened one end of it and carefully slid out the rolled canvas it contained. He unrolled the canvas, putting an ash tray on either end to hold it flat. Then he straightened and, with Hester beside him, looked at the painting. The canvas was a side view of an exquisitely formed nude woman, done in soft blues and ochers with shadings of darker blues to indicate shadowing. The figure stood in a back-lighted doorway, her pose serene, as if waiting for a lover.

The Woman, Wendall thought with his trained cataloger's mind. *Painted by Vincenzio Boresi. Done while in residence at the National Academy in Venice in the year 1542. Present appraised value: $110,000.*

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Wendall said.

Hester smiled and slipped an arm around her husband. She leaned her head on his shoulder. "It's always been your favorite, hasn't it?"

"Yes." He bent and kissed her lightly on the lips. "She's my favorite woman, next to you." He patted her fondly, then turned his attention back to the business at hand. He quickly rolled up the canvas and put it back into the tube. "Now then," he said, "are we all packed?"

"Yes." She pointed to three suitcases near the door.

"Passports?"

"In my bag."

"Money? Tickets?"

"Yes, love, I have everything. Nothing's been forgotten, really. All we need to do is get into a taxi and go to the airport."

Wendall pursed his lips and looked around the poor little apartment a final time. They had lived there a lot of years; shared a lot of love and many dreams. Most of the dreams had not come to pass. *But*

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this one will, Wendall promised himself silently.

"Well, let's go then," he said finally.

Wendall had stolen the Boresi masterpiece thirty minutes after the gallery closed to the public that Friday evening. It was not a remarkable theft, since Wendall himself was the assistant curator of the gallery, and as such had access to every locked area on the premises. In addition, he knew by heart the route and schedule of the three watchmen who comprised the night patrol. So it was not surprising that he was able to take the Boresi and get out of the building with it. What *would* be surprising, when the theft was discovered, was the fact that Wendall was the thief.

Wendall had served the Leighton Gallery faithfully for eighteen years. He had begun as an apprentice cataloger and worked his way up through the ranks until four years previously when he had been given an assistant curatorship by Herbert Menzies, the curator.

"It's almost certain they'll make me the next curator," Wendall had told Hester elatedly that night. "Old Menzies is nearly sixty-five, you know. He's probably getting ready to ease into retirement. Making me his assistant must be a way of preparing me to assume the overall responsibility, I'm sure."

"I wouldn't depend a great deal on that, if I were you," had been Hester's conservative reply. "After all, you're not British, you know."

"What's that got to do with it?" Wendall wanted to know.

"Perhaps nothing," she told him with a shrug. "But you know how the Leighton directors are—they're a stuffy lot, with their school ties and what not. You also know how they feel about Americans—they think they're all combinations of comedians and cowboys."

"Well, I'm sure they don't think that about *me,*" Wendall said. "I mean, look at the facts, Hester: I've worked for them fourteen years; I've lived in England that long; I'm married to an Englishwoman; I'm legally a British subject. I don't even *feel* like an American anymore."

"But you still talk like one," she reminded him. She had taken one of his hands and pressed it against her cheek. "Look, darling, I don't want to put a damper on your promotion; I think it's wonderful your being made assistant curator. I just don't think you should count on it turning into anything more than it is."

As it turned out, Hester had been right. What Wendall had thought was a step toward the curatorship turned out to be a stone wall. Her-

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bert Menzies did not retire at the age of sixty-five. Four years later, at the age of sixty-nine, he was still actively engaged as curator, and Wendall was still waiting for some indication of who the next curator would be if and when Menzies decided to step down.

Word finally came six months after Menzies' sixty-ninth birthday: he would retire at age seventy. At that time he would be given a directorship for life, which would enable him to vote for his choice of a successor. That choice, Wendall learned, was to be one of the junior curators of the London Museum, a person who happened to be a nephew-by-marriage to one of Leighton Gallery's founding directors.

Wendall, understandably, was crushed. He called Hester at once. "It isn't fair," he told her.

"No," she said with quiet disappointment, "it isn't."

"I've given them eighteen years. Eighteen years! And they bring in an outsider."

"They don't see it that way, of course," she reasoned. "To them, you're the outsider."

"I won't stand for it," he had promised grimly. "I won't. Not after eighteen years."

He had sat in his office that afternoon and stared into space. He had not moved for three full hours. His mind had been laced with thoughts of the past—the long hours he had put in as a cataloger, resulting in eyestrain and headaches; the stress and pressure he had endured as assistant to the domineering Herbert Menzies; perhaps worst of all, the years of having Hester do without while he worked his way laboriously up the ladder only to be halted at the very brink of success.

There was a phrase that Hester was fond of using whenever she found something quite out of the question. *Unthinkable*, she would say in her rich British voice. That one word summed up exactly how Wendall felt about the manner in which he was being shunted aside by Leighton Gallery. It was unthinkable.

When he finally came out of his trance that afternoon, he discovered that it was past quitting time. Listlessly he took his hat, coat, and umbrella from behind the door and started out. As he crossed the gallery's east wing, he noticed that his favorite work—*The Woman* by Boresi—was a fraction of an inch low on the left side. He stepped over the velvet rope that kept admirers an arm's length-and-a-half away, and carefully straightened it. Then he gently put a finger on the hardened oil that formed the alluring figure of the woman Boresi had created. A slight smile parted his

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lips. *How lovely she was,* he thought; *how exciting and arousing.* Many were the nights, back in younger times, when he had glanced at *The Woman* on his way out after work and then hurried home to the warm, *real* woman who waited for him there.

As he stood admiring the painting he had just straightened, Wendall had begun to dwell again on the injustice of what was being done to him. At that moment, subtly and without conscious effort, the idea of stealing *The Woman* first entered his mind.

The first-class section in the plane that took them to Tangier was so sparsely filled that Wendall and Hester had a quarter of the cabin all to themselves. As the big jet sliced through the Mediterranean night, Wendall removed photocopies of four cards he had obtained from and then replaced in the Leighton Gallery confidential collector files. Each of the cards contained private information on four art collectors known to have attempted at one time or another to purchase *The Woman.*

Leaning closer to Hester, Wendall held up each card and, in a quiet voice, analyzed them for her.

"Victor Blanca," he said clinically, "comes from an old-line South American-German family that made millions in armaments during World War Two. All of their factories were in Germany, but all of the profits were filtered through Swiss banks to Argentina. Blanca lives in Buenos Aires and has one of the finest art collections in the Western Hemisphere." He put the photocopy behind the others and went on to the next one.

"Kiru Sakata. Lives in Nagoya, Japan. Owns one of the largest fishing fleets in Asia. Also the most extensive collection of Western paintings ever held by an Oriental." He turned up the next copy.

"Bey Hama, of Damascus, Syria. Wealthy import-export man. He has a rather unique collection: all his works of art—paintings, statuary, carvings, and so on—are exclusively of women. He's a great admirer of the female form; they say his residential gallery is one vast shrine of undraped women from all over the world." Now Wendall came to the last card.

"Sheik Karbala of Kuwait. One of the ten richest oil royalty recipients in the world. The man lives like a Roman emperor in a huge castle on the Persian Gulf. He's engaged in a constant battle with a neighboring sheik over who can collect the most valuable objets d'art for their respective palaces."

Hester pursed her lips thoughtfully. "You're quite certain, are

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you, that none of these men will balk at bidding for a stolen painting?"

"Positive," Wendall replied. "All four of them are known to have had shady dealings in the art world in the past; that's why the gallery had a file on each of them. As a matter of fact, Hama, the Syrian, made a direct overture himself to Menzies in an effort to obtain *The Woman* a couple of years ago. Oh, they'll bid, all right; I'd stake my reputation on it."

"You already have," Hester reminded him. "When do you suppose they'll discover that the real painting is missing?"

"Sometime next week, I'd say. No one will even suspect it this weekend; the watchmen could pass the forgery from now until doomsday and never tell the difference. On Monday when I don't show up, they'll try ringing me at the flat. When they aren't able to reach me by Tuesday, they'll probably send someone out. After they're certain that we've disappeared, they'll begin to have suspicions and Menzies will start taking a close look at everything in the place. He'll spot the forgery at once, of course."

"You don't think there's any way for them to trace the forgery to Jocko, do you?"

"None," Wendall said emphatically. "If there were, I wouldn't have involved him. After all, Jocko's my friend."

Wendall rested his head against the seat and thought about Jocko. He was a little Scotsman who had been painting for years without earning even bed and board. He had a small, cluttered Soho studio, in which he spent his talent grinding out reproduction after reproduction of all the old masters, which were then shipped across the channel where they were sold to tourists in Paris.

Jocko had remarkable talent, but he seemed to lack whatever it was that a really creative artist managed to instill in his work. His reproduction ability, however, was superb; as a *copier*, Jocko had few peers. He had a method of turning out flat imitations on stock board at the rate of a dozen per day with a special silk-screening method he had devised. Better reproductions, on ungrained canvas, took a little longer, and special commissions, such as the copying of *The Woman*—complete with aging process—kept Jocko involved as long as a month. The wait was well worthwhile, of course, if one wanted a copy which would fool all except the very best of the experts.

"No," Wendall assured Hester again, "there's no way they can trace the copy to Jocko. The work is so good that it's almost pure Bo-

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resi: no one in the gallery would be able to detect the switch except Menzies and me. So Jocko's well in the clear. He'll be well paid too, so don't worry about him."

"All right, dear, if you say so."

Hester shifted slightly in her seat and closed her eyes. Momentarily Wendall closed his own eyes and dozed. While he slept, he kept one hand on the cardboard tube resting snugly beside him on the seat.

Their plane landed at Rabat Airport in the early morning. The sun had just begun to sprinkle its glow over the wavy Moroccan sands. Towering palm trees were still moving gently with the last of the night breeze.

"It's lovely," Hester said when they debarked and she got her first look at the country. "You never did tell me why you chose Tangier," she recalled suddenly.

"Two reasons," her husband replied. "One, no visas are required to enter or leave Morocco; all we need are passports. Second, overseas telephone communication facilities are excellent. There's a third reason, too: I'm told it's possible to obtain counterfeit identification papers in Tangier."

They proceeded through Moroccan customs where the officials did not even bother to check their luggage. The tourist information desk assisted them in hiring a car for the drive up the coast to Tangier. It was only minutes after landing that they were comfortably seated in an air-conditioned sedan, being sped northward.

Their motor trip to Tangier was unexpectedly pleasant. They passed a myriad of scenery that, after London, fascinated them. Cacti as large as their car loomed up on the inland side of the fine, smooth highway. Surprisingly, orange trees flourished in the same soil. Along some stretches of the road, enormous roses grew wild and beautiful. Goat herds could be seen in the distance, tended by Arab boys with curved staffs. Once their driver slowed as a glistening Moroccan fox scurried across the road.

When their car finally approached Tangier itself, Hester and Wendall felt as if they were entering a three-dimensional picture postcard. Backed by gently curving hills was the most exquisite bay. Had they been world travelers, they would have felt that the spectacle of Tangier's harbor equaled Acapulco, Avalon, and anything the French Riviera had to offer. Untraveled as they were, the sight of it merely took their breath away.

After entering the city, Wendall consulted a guidebook and had the driver take them to the luxurious Ref Hotel. Half an hour later, they were installed in a sitting room-

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bedroom suite and were being served a light lunch of mutton pie, warm Moroccan flat bread, and sweet mint tea.

After they had unpacked and organized themselves, Wendall made the first of his calls. Through the overseas operator, he contacted the import-export offices of Bey Hama in Damascus. He had his call connected to a clerk in the English-language section and patiently conveyed the message he wanted delivered to Bey Hama.

"Tell the Bey that I have a valuable painting available for confidential sale," he said. "Tell him that he can learn which painting it is by reading the London *Times* for the next few days. Tell him that I will contact him personally at noon, your time, on the day that the story appears in the *Times*, and to please have an interpreter on an extension to translate."

When he was certain the clerk had the message correct, Wendall disconnected, signaled for the overseas operator, and placed his second call, this one to the estate of Sheik Karbala in Kuwait. Wendall indicated that he would talk to any English-speaking person on the Sheik's household staff. After several minutes he found himself on the line with Karbala's chief appointments secretary who spoke excellent English. It took Wendall only a moment to leave his message, and then he was off the phone for a while.

That evening, immediately after dinner, Wendall placed his third call. He attempted to contact Victor Blanca through the Blanca family bank in Buenos Aires. Unable to do so, he left his message with a multilingual teller in the foreign exchange section.

They then went out for the evening, spending an hour at the Koutoubia Palace, another at the casino, and having a late snack at a bar. At midnight they arrived back in their hotel rooms for the night.

While Hester lounged luxuriantly in their quarters' sunken tub, Wendall put through his last overseas call, to the headquarters of Sakata Fleet, Limited, in Nagoya, Japan. To his utter surprise, he was connected at once to Kiru Sakata himself, who spoke broken but understandable English. Wendall did not deviate from his message routine, even though Sakata attempted to question him with regard to the painting's identity. Because of the distance involved, however, he did tell the Japanese that if he were interested in purchasing the painting, after he learned which one it was, he must be prepared to travel nearly halfway around the world to bid on it.

When this fourth call was com-

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pleted, Wendall sighed heavily. The gears were now in motion. Only time would tell him if they meshed.

The news that *The Woman* was missing broke sooner than expected.

Wendall had spent the better part of Sunday prowling the native *Casbah* trying to make a contact to obtain counterfeit papers and passports. Late in the day he had met a tourist guide who expressed more than passing interest in Wendall's requirements and invited him to meet with another party at a *Casbah* cafe the following morning. Wendall had met them, on Monday morning, and a tentative agreement had been reached: documents would be prepared, and Wendall would pay for them only if they were of the highest quality.

An hour after leaving the two men, Wendall, with Hester in tow, dutifully reported to an Arab photographer's studio to which the guide's friend had directed them. After having their pictures taken, they were on their way back to the hotel when Hester spotted a man at a sidewalk coffee bar reading the overseas London *Times*. On the front page, which was opened toward her, she saw a headline which read: VALUABLE PAINTING BELIEVED STOLEN. Hurrying to the nearest news shop, they bought a copy of the same edition and stood reading it in the doorway.

"Menzies!" Wendall said, when he was halfway through the story. "I might have known! He tried to call me Saturday morning to find out where some papers were. Couldn't get me all day Saturday, so he went to the flat on Sunday. Thought perhaps we were ill or something, so he talked our dear landlady, Mrs. Sned, into letting him into the flat—"

"The nerve!" Hester said.

"When he saw that the closets were empty," Wendall continued, "he apparently rushed to the gallery and started checking everything in the place. He found *The Woman* imitation almost at once."

"What do we do now?" Hester said, biting her lip.

"Exactly what we planned to do," Wendall answered firmly. "Except now we do it two days sooner."

They returned to their hotel suite and Wendall placed overseas calls to Bey Hama and Sheik Karbala. He advised each that if they were interested in bidding on *The Woman*, they were to fly immediately to Tangier. Bey Hama was to register at the El Minzah Hotel; Karbala was to stay at the Velasquez Palace. They would be contacted the following day.

While waiting for the right hour

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to make the other two calls, Wendall visited the Bank of Morocco's main branch and secured forms which would permit the bank to act as agent in the transfer of an unspecified sum of money to a Swiss banking firm. Back at the hotel, Wendall filled out the lengthy papers in the fictitious name he had chosen for his and Hester's counterfeit identification.

Later that night, Wendall called Victor Blanca, directed him to come to Tangier and register at the El Djanina Hotel, and told him the same thing he had told Bey Hama and Karbala. Later still he again reached Kiru Sakata directly and repeated his instructions a fourth time. He told Sakata to check in at the Fez, since he and Hester would be leaving the following morning.

Early Tuesday, Wendall met with the tourist guide and his friend. He examined the forged identification papers and passports; even to Wendall's trained eye, they were of superb quality. He paid them the agreed price and added a ten percent gratuity. Wendall then went directly to the bank, presented the completed currency transfer forms, properly identified himself with his new papers, and signed an agreement giving the bank a one-percent agent's fee.

Returning to the hotel, Wendall picked up Hester and their luggage and checked out. He hired a car to drive them back to Rabat Airport. Once there, they deposited their luggage in transient lockers, mingled with the airport crowd, had lunch, then reclaimed their bags, hired another car, and had themselves driven to the nearby Rabat Hilton. Using their new identification papers, they checked in there as if they had only just arrived.

After they were settled in their room, Wendall telephoned the El Minzah and Velasquez Palace hotels back up the coast in Tangier. Both Bey Hama and Sheik Karbala had arrived. He called the El Djanina and learned that Victor Blanca would be arriving later in the day. He placed a fourth call to the Fez and was told that Kiru Sakata had cabled from Japan for a reservation.

"It's working," Wendall told Hester after hanging up. "Tomorrow will tell."

On Wednesday morning, Wendall hired a car and driver and, with one large suitcase, returned to Tangier. Near the native *Casbah* he located a small cafe with a back room and telephone available for private business. Wendall took the room for the whole day, removed his suitcase from the car, and instructed his driver to leave and return for him at three o'clock that afternoon.

When he was alone in the room,

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Wendall called the Fez. Sakata had arrived. Wendall instructed him to come to the cafe's private room at one o'clock. Next he called the other three men at their respective hotels and, either directly or through interpreters, gave them the same instructions.

When he was through calling, Wendall went about setting up the room to suit his purposes. He had the proprietor arrange four comfortable chairs in a neat row facing away from the room's high Moorish windows. Behind these chairs he had several straight wooden ones placed, for the interpreters and possible bodyguards the men might bring with them.

From his suitcase, Wendall removed a collapsible easel and set it up. He also assembled a wooden show frame, brought out the mailing tube, carefully slid out the canvas of *The Woman*, and mounted it inside the frame's clamps. He stood the painting on the easel, facing the chairs and the natural light from the windows. He examined and rearranged it critically. When it was turned just right, when every brushstroke of Vincenzio Boresi's genius was alive and vibrant to the eye, and the woman in the painting projected enough dimension to increase a man's pulse-beat, only then was Wendall satisfied enough to drape a velvet cover gently over it.

The potential buyers began arriving just before one o'clock and, as Wendall had instructed, were shown into the private room by the proprietor. They were, Wendall observed, a colorful lot.

Karbala had two bodyguards and an interpreter. Victor Blanca was accompanied by a dark, mustached interpreter whom Wendall guessed was certainly armed. Sakata and Bey Hama had each arrived alone, apparently needing neither translation nor security. The men all sat in their chairs as placed. Wendall addressed them in a calm, businesslike manner.

"Gentlemen," he said, "so there will be no misunderstanding about this transaction, please allow me to pass my identification among you." He handed his authentic passport to the nearest man while the two interpreters translated for their employers. "You have all undoubtedly read about me—" he walked over to the easel, "and about this," he added with a flair as he undraped *The Woman*.

The eyes of the four art collectors riveted on the Boresi painting. Bey Hama's mouth actually seemed to be watering, and Sheik Karbala's fingers drummed nervously. Victor Blanca's eyes narrowed to slits. Only the Japanese Sakata remained inscrutable.

"The value of the painting is

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$110,000 American," Wendall continued. He retrieved his passport and handed each man an envelope and a note pad. "I will accept one sealed bid from each of you and then ask you to return to your respective hotels. I will then open the bids and deliver the painting to whichever of you had bid the highest amount over $110,000. I will telephone the other three to advise that you were not successful in your bids. I will not, of course, divulge to any of the unsuccessful bidders the identity of the new owner. Naturally, it would be unwise for the successful bidder to publicize his good fortune except to his closest associates in his own country. Now then, is my arrangement acceptable to all concerned?"

After a moment of translation and another of clarification, the four men agreed.

"Very well, gentlemen," Wendall said, "if you'll just jot down your name and bid, seal it in the envelope, and leave it on your chair, we'll be in business."

The men looked suspiciously at one another, each apparently waiting for someone else to write first. One of them, Bey Hama, rose and walked over for a closer look at the masterpiece. Following his example, Kiru Sakata did the same. While they were doing so, Sheik Karbala abruptly rose, quickly wrote something on the top page of his pad, and sealed it in the envelope. Kiru Sakata frowned and returned to his chair to do the same. Blanca was the third to write his bid. Bey Hama, sighing wearily, turned away from *The Woman* and completed the cycle.

"Gentlemen," said Wendall, "I would like to ask that each of you immediately secure a cashier's check in the amount of your bid and have it ready in case yours is the successful bid. I regret having to put all of you to this trouble, but in my position I'm afraid it's necessary. Now then, if everyone is finished—"

The four collectors and their escorts left. Wendall calmly ignored the sealed envelopes while he unmounted *The Woman* and put the canvas back into the mailing tube, and the tube back into his suitcase. He left the easel and empty frame; he had no more use for them.

He finally gathered up the envelopes and sat down to examine the bids. The low figure was $136,000. The two middle bids were $155,000 and $176,000. The high offer, as he had hoped, was an even $200,000.

Well, Wendall thought, *it is nearly over.* He had the bids. All that remained was the delivery, the payment, and the deposit of that payment in the after-hours drop of the Bank of Morocco.

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Then the drive back to Rabat to get Hester, and after several changes of airlines and flights, the last leg of the journey to the island paradise they had selected for themselves in the South Pacific.

Yes, he thought again, *it is nearly over.*

They both loved Tahiti. Hester had turned as brown as a native and was so content she said she never cared to leave the island. They had a very nice home overlooking their own beach some fifteen miles outside Papeete. Their days were spent swimming, painting, reading, gardening. It was, to them, an ideal life.

Exactly one year to the day after they had fled Tangier, Wendall sat on his terrace and decided, after sober reflection, that he would stop worrying about repercussions. After all, a year *was* a long time. If anything had been going to happen, surely it would have happened by now.

He was checking over a financial statement that had arrived just that morning from his Swiss bank, when Hester walked up from the beach, drying herself.

"Money holding out?" she asked teasingly.

"No, love, we've spent the entire $667,000 in one year," Wendall replied dryly.

Hester smiled. "In that case, you'd better call those four collectors together again and see if they want to buy some more of Jocko's work. Ready for lunch?"

"Just about. Let me put these bank papers away."

They went into the house; Hester to the kitchen, Wendall to his desk in their small study. Wendall put the bank papers in their proper place and straightened his desk top a bit. Then he sat back and looked up at *The Woman* above his desk. He smiled a slight, pleased smile. He hoped Bey Hama, Sheik Karbala, Kiru Sakata, and Victor Blanca derived as much pleasure from their imitations as he did from the original.

Wendall sighed contentedly as Hester called him for lunch.

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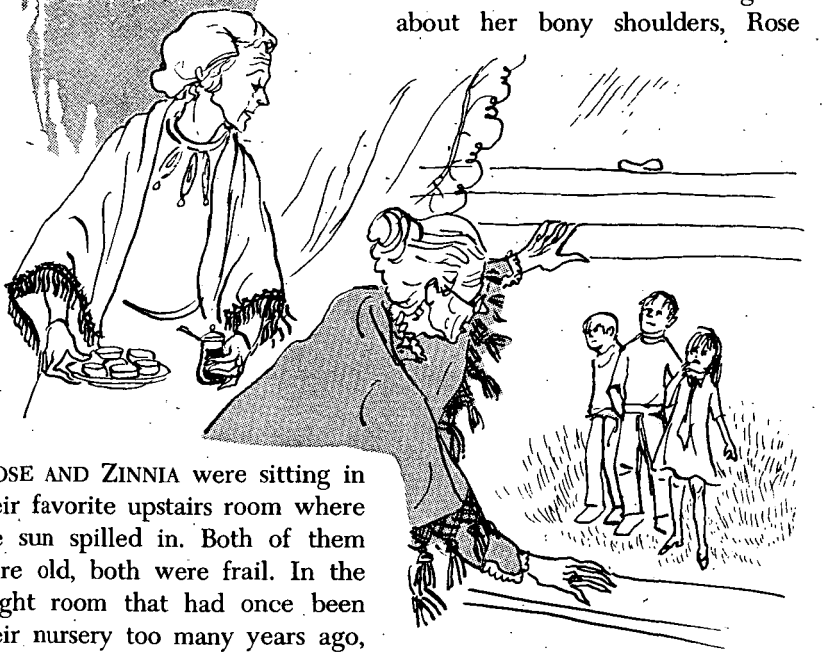
Depending upon the task and the incentive, one might accidentally prove most proficient.

CARL'S CLUB



ROSE AND ZINNIA were sitting in their favorite upstairs room where the sun spilled in. Both of them were old, both were frail. In the bright room that had once been their nursery too many years ago, they sat and watched the world of the neighborhood beyond their window where life was lived by others.

"Now, don't stir, Zinnia," Rose told her sister as the teakettle in the kitchen below whistled its summons. "I'll just get my cane and scoot downstairs and be back in a jiffy. I'll bring hot biscuits, and those good elderberry preserves."

As Zinnia drew her shawl tighter about her bony shoulders, Rose

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moved slowly through the room and then down the uncarpeted stairs, trying not to think about arthritis and other insults to the aged.

When she returned twenty minutes later carrying a tray, she discovered Zinnia had dozed in her rocker.

"Zinnia," she whispered, her voice haunting the room that had once belonged to two little girls long gone but not quite forgotten. "Zinnia, it's time for tea."

"I was just resting my eyes," Zinnia said, blinking rapidly and peering at the tray as Rose set it down on the little table in front of the window. "The sun glares so," she offered by way of explanation for her lapse.

They pulled their chairs close to the table and fingered the hot biscuits that crumbled at their touch. Rose poured the tea into delicate china cups and then replaced the colorful cozy on the teapot. Two faded flowers, Rose and Zinnia sat contentedly in front of their window on the world, and sipped and nibbled.

"Oh, there they are!" squeaked Zinnia suddenly, almost spilling tea on her black silk dress. "The children!

"That's Carl," she added a moment later, pointing to the boy who might have been thirteen, possibly fourteen. "He's growing like a weed."

"Like animals," Rose mused, watching the boys. "They are like young animals. See how they run!"

"Chipmunks," agreed her sister. "Bunnies."

"I wish—" Rose began, and quickly stuffed her mouth with a bite of biscuit.

"Carl has grown so," Zinnia said quickly, not wanting to be frightened by hearing her sister's wish. "So has little Mike Jenkins. Why, he looks quite manly even if he is only twelve."

"Eleven," corrected Rose.

After another cup of tea to assist the sun in warming their old bones, the two women began to feel quite relaxed. The presence of the boys playing in the yard next door soothed them and proved that life went on despite clocks and calendars. Even though times changed, certain things remained un-

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changeable. Children, for example. Games, for example.

"Who's that new boy?" Zinnia inquired, pushing her glasses up and squinting because of the sun.

"Where?"

"The small one over there by the cherry tree. The one with the mischievous grin on his face and the mud on his shoes."

Rose also squinted. "That's the Cabell boy from down the block. The Cabells bought the old Marsh house, don't you remember?"

"Poor Mr. Cabell," Zinnia said.

"He's home from the hospital."

"How do you know?"

"I asked the boy who delivered our groceries yesterday. Mr. Cabell's coming along just fine. His skull fracture is mending rapidly. The doctor said so."

"The Marsh house is undeniably old. Things break. Wood rots."

For a moment, Rose heard something other than the mere truth in her sister's remark but then she pulled herself back into the present and said, "Most men aren't handy these days. Not like in our time. Daddy would have noticed that the storage shelf in Mr. Cabell's house was rotten and offered to fix it. He would have gotten a hammer and some nails and he would have put up a new shelf made of—white pine—and then that heavy old toolbox wouldn't have fallen down on Mr. Cabell like it did, you know."

"It looks like the Cabell boy has joined Carl's club," Zinnia observed.

"Yes, it does look that way. Carl has an arm around his shoulder. I'm so glad. The Cabell child was so forlorn the first few weeks in town. No one would play with him."

"Karen did."

"Karen doesn't count—you know that."

Zinnia giggled into her cup. "I know what you mean. Girls don't get to play boys' games or join their clubs."

"There's Karen now. She's running up to Carl. See?"

Zinnia commented, "She's crying."

"Ah, again." Rose looked at the tea tray and then she got up, opened the window and called down to Karen.

The little girl with the long brown bangs looked up. So did the three boys gathered in the yard next door.

"Biscuits, child!" Rose cried, beckoning. "Homemade preserves. Come and visit with us!"

Karen looked at Carl. He said something to her and then turned away brusquely. So did the Cabell boy and his companion, Mike Jenkins. Karen was left alone, effectively banished from their coterie.

Rose beckoned again, trying not

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to seem insistent or anxious. She only wanted to help end the child's obvious sense of alienation, didn't she? That was all, wasn't it?

Karen took a tentative step toward the fence gate and looked back at Carl. She took another step toward the gate.

Rose smiled at Zinnia and then called down to tell Karen that the front door was unlocked and she was to walk right in and come along upstairs. They would wait for her.

When Karen, all blue eyes and feathery brown bangs, appeared in the open door of the room, Rose held out her arms to her. Karen pretended not to notice the gesture. She reached up to wipe one wet eye, thought better of it, and instead brushed fingers through her hair.

"Do have some tea," Zinnia said.

"Zinnia!" Rose exclaimed, shocked. "She's just a child!" Then, fearing that she might have offended Karen by that dark condemnation, she said, "There's some nice cold milk in the refrigerator downstairs in the kitchen. You'll find a clean glass in the cupboard above the sink. Can you manage by yourself, dear?"

Karen nodded and disappeared.

Rose and Zinnia heard her bounding back up the stairs a few minutes later.

Zinnia gripped her sister's thin arm. "She'll spill the milk all over everywhere!"

"Hush! Spilled milk is a small price to pay for company! Besides, the child needs comforting—that's plain to see."

Zinnia, admonished, subsided into silence.

As Karen warily entered the room, she said, "I didn't spill any."

"Of course you didn't," Rose said. "Come sit here beside me. Have a biscuit and some nice elderberry preserves."

Karen was less than competent as she served herself. The preserves kept sliding off her biscuit to plop-plop on the little plate Rose had given her. "This is slippery stuff," she said, eyeing the women nervously as if she expected to be punished for spilling the preserves.

Suddenly, both Rose and Zinnia found themselves utterly unable to speak. What could one say to children? You couldn't ask them if business was good. You couldn't talk to them about the state of the world. Your world wasn't their world. The question would be ridiculous. Then what?

"Does it taste good?" Zinnia managed after a moment, referring to the biscuit.

"It's okay."

Rose ventured, "I'm so very glad to hear that Mr. Cabell is on the

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mend. That was a nasty accident he had."

"Carl says people have accidents all the time," Karen mumbled through a mouthful of crumbs.

"Well, he's right," Rose said. "They do. More's the pity."

"He says," Karen continued, "that they ought to be more careful. It's their own fault, Carl says."

"You like Carl, do you?" Zinnia asked, thinking of someone named Andrew whose face, once loved, she could no longer quite picture.

"Sure, all the kids do," Karen said. "Carl's cool."

Cool! Rose heard: *The cat's pyjamas.*

"He looks like every other little boy to me," Zinnia said, taking a sip of her tea.

Rose gave her sister a warning look. "He must miss his brother very much. *I* certainly do. He was such a pleasant and well-mannered little boy."

Karen said, "He died a long time ago."

"Not so long ago," Rose said before she could stop herself. "Only last August."

"Well, this is February," Karen countered.

Rose heard the deceptive voice of a clock somewhere, but Karen, she realized, couldn't hear it at all.

"Carl's little brother," Zinnia mused. "Dead because of that unlabeled ant poison. And Mike Jenkins' uncle over on Maple Avenue who fell off Lover's Bluff out on Black Mountain. Miss Beralyk, who teaches at the elementary school—"

"She probably wasn't looking where she was going," Karen commented.

"Perhaps not," Rose said. "They say her car was completely ruined when she crashed into that debris piled up on the West End road."

"*She* was almost ruined, too," Zinnia volunteered thinly. "She's still in a wheelchair. But Carl's mother's death was the worst thing that's happened in this town in a good many years. Awful, just awful. Electrocuted right in her own bathtub. Just imagine!"

"Imagine," Rose exclaimed, a hand over her heart, "taking a bath with a radio perched right there on the edge of the tub. When I heard that it had fallen into the water—well, I wished for kerosine lamps."

"What's kerosine?" Karen asked.

"It's something people use in lamps—they used to, I mean. It's a liquid, like gasoline. You light it and—"

"It burns?"

"Yes, dear, it burns. But now that I think of it, I realize that kerosine could cause an accident just as easily as electricity. But we shouldn't be talking like this. It's morbid. Let's talk of something pleasant. Is

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Carl your beau, Karen?" Rose asked.

"What does beau mean?"

Rose was momentarily disconcerted. How to put it in Karen's terms? Of course! "It means—uh, boyfriend—but it's a much prettier word, don't you think? Is he? Your beau, I mean?"

Karen made a face.

"Come now," Rose persisted gaily. "Confess. I've seen you looking at him. There's absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about. Carl is a fine boy and always speaks most politely to me when we chance to meet."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Child!" Rose moaned. "Are you going to cry? Why? Whatever for?"

"Carl won't even let me join his club!" Karen wailed. "He says only boys can belong because boys are tougher than girls. Girls, he says, can't pass the club's initiation test because they don't have guts like boys do."

Guts. The word shocked the sisters and so they chose to pretend it hadn't been uttered.

"Couldn't Carl make you . . . couldn't he make you an honorary or an associate member, Karen?" Rose inquired. "That would be the considerate thing to do."

"The kind thing," emphasized Zinnia.

"You have to pass the initiation test first," Karen said, wiping her face to blend salt water and elderberry preserves in a raucous pattern on her cheeks.

"When I was initiated into the sorority at my college," Rose declared, "we had to wear funny hats and go downtown and—"

"You don't have to do that stuff to join Carl's club," Karen interrupted.

"Well, what, then?" Rose asked.

"I can't tell," Karen whispered. "It's a secret of the club."

"But you said you weren't a member. How do you know about the initiation if it's a club secret?"

Karen sighed and folded her hands in her lap. Impatiently, she explained. "I kept asking Carl to let me join. I asked him and I asked him—lots of times. He told me about the initiation but I wouldn't. So—" Tears threatened again.

Rose looked at Zinnia. They silently agreed that they had better change the subject. After all, Karen was only—how old? No more than twelve, certainly. Before they could think of a safe subject to discuss, Karen spoke.

"What would you two do? I mean, if you wanted to belong more than anything else in the whole world and you were just a girl. I mean, what would you do?"

Rose and Zinnia both looked away, hoping the question would disappear in the air of the room

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since neither of them knew how to answer it. Outside the window in the yard next door, they saw Carl staring up at them. They both smiled and waved to him. He waved back.

"Please!" Karen pleaded. "What would you do?"

"Rose?" Zinnia said. "What would you do?"

Rose looked from her sister to Karen's anguished face. What would she do if the world she wanted to belong to so badly denied her membership? Today she would merely shrug her shoulders and turn away. But yesterday, when she was as young as Karen and clubs and beaus were the only worthwhile world anywhere . . . The answer was plain.

"Well," Rose began, "I would have courage and I would pass the initiation test and then I would belong to the club. Courage, child. You must simply have courage."

"I have to go to the bathroom," Karen announced.

"Oh!" Rose said.

"Oh!" repeated Zinnia, and then, "It's just down the hall, second door on the right. You'll find lavender soap in the dish for—afterward."

Karen asked if she could have another biscuit with preserves.

"But you said you had to go to the bathroom," Zinnia cried, confused.

"I always eat in the bathroom."

"Then help yourself," Rose said, looking away and trying not to frown.

When Karen had gone, carrying her biscuit heaped high with elderberry preserves, Zinnia leaned close to her sister and whispered, "It's silly of her to want to belong to Carl's club. She should stay at home and learn how to be a lady."

"It's not silly," Rose argued. "Children have a need to belong to each other in their own private world. Adults are always ordering them about or else ignoring them. So children need each other and they need their clubs and secret societies."

"Perhaps you're right," Zinnia mused.

"Of course I am. Oh, look! The boys are playing mumblety-peg."

"They are not," Zinnia contradicted. "They are throwing their ugly old knives at the trunk of that poor old sycamore."

As Carl and the other two boys looked up at her, Rose waved again.

Then the screams began, thin and shrill.

Rose gasped, stiffening in her chair.

"It's Karen!" Zinnia cried and struggled up out of her chair to totter toward the door.

"Wait for me!" Rose called to her, but Zinnia was already gone

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from the room. Rose got up, reached for her cane, and hurried as fast as she could after her sister.

Karen was still screaming, but the sounds did not seem to be coming from the bathroom. In fact, Rose realized, they were coming from somewhere on the first floor of the house. She started toward the stairs that were just around the bend in the hall, but before she reached them she heard a scream that wasn't Karen's. It died abruptly as the terrible thunder of something falling resounded throughout the house.

Rose reached the landing and saw her sister's crumpled body lying motionless at the foot of the staircase. She was barely aware of the sudden silence in the house as she dropped her cane and started swiftly down the steps.

She became aware of the staircase shifting position. It was sliding up over her head where it had absolutely no right in the world to be. When she struck the floor after bouncing brokenly down the staircase, she lost consciousness.

Some unmeasured amount of time later, sounds reached her. Voices. But she couldn't respond.

"I say no fair. She's just a girl!"

"But she's got a right to join the club!"

The second speaker was Carl, Rose perceived through the mauve fog closing in on her. She tried to call out to him, to ask him to help her. A faint anger stirred within her as she wondered how the boys dared to stand around and discuss such silly matters as Karen's club membership when she was—when she was— She dared not even think the word.

"Then I spread lots of elderberry preserves all over the top step," Rose heard Karen saying in the dim distance. "And I came down here and hollered my head off. It worked."

Carl said, "I officially declare Karen a member of my club. She's been initiated. She got *two* of them! That makes her even better than any of us guys. Anybody want to fight about it?"

Silence.

Then Karen said, "Listen, have any of you ever heard of kerosine? Well, I have. Come on and I'll tell you all about it."

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A new broom really does sweep clean—with the right operator.

THE TAKE-OVER

by A. F. Oreshnik

YOU CAN BUY a lot of talent when you offer a salary of a thousand dollars a week, and I flew back from Chicago with ten of the best. Their combined experience read like the script of a movie written for Cagney, Bogart and Robinson at their late-late show best. Each had beaten more charges than he had been convicted of; and each had spent enough time in prison to have learned caution, but not enough to indicate incompetence. Their average age was thirty-three, average height well over six feet, and average weight in excess of two hundred pounds. There were six Caucasians, three blacks, and one Mexican-American—I've always been an equal-opportunity employer.

They knew I was setting up a take-over, but I didn't give them any details of the operation, or make any assignments, until we were all in Morgan City. Then I took them to the office of the trucking company I owned and laid it all out for them. It was late at night and we were the only ones there. It was a perfect place to hold secret meetings.

"Okay," I said, "this is the situation. Gambling, drugs and prostitution are all run by the same man.

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It'll be as easy to take over all of them as it would be to grab one. In fact, it'll be easier; and now is the perfect time. The citizens of this fair city have just elected a reform candidate as their new mayor and he's made a lot of wild promises about cleaning things up. The guy hasn't taken office yet, but the man running the rackets has adopted a wait-and-see attitude. He's doing business as usual, but isn't going out of his way to attract attention to his operations."

I went to the wall and pulled down a large map of the city. "There it is," I said. "All ripe for the plucking. If we move fast and hit hard, we'll have it tied with a silk ribbon in a couple of days."

"How?" two of the ten asked in unison.

I smiled and told them how.

By the time the meeting broke up, I had my newest employees divided into five two-man teams. Each had been given detailed instructions and a timetable to follow in carrying them out. I had held myself in reserve to act as reinforcement for any team needing it.

It hadn't been difficult for me to establish my authority over the ten—the first week's pay had done that for me. Also, I knew I'd have no trouble keeping control. They were big, but I was bigger; and as the result of wounds I had received while fighting in Korea, I had a face that few strangers ever chanced making angry.

I had never had any dealings in the rackets we were going to take over, but I didn't view this as a handicap. I had been more than successful in legitimate business. Rackets are merely a left-handed kind of business, so the same talents and aptitudes would see me through. I knew people and how to deal with them—that would be enough.

My men went to their hotels, and I went home. My wife, Margie, was asleep, and the house was quiet. It always seemed quiet now that our son had married and our two daughters were away at college. Friends had suggested we find hobbies to fill our leisure hours, so that's what we had done; but I could imagine their shocked expressions if they ever learned what I was doing.

In the morning I kissed Margie good-bye and left the house. I drove to a nearby filling station and parked beside the outdoor telephone booth. I waited almost an hour before the phone rang for the first time. The other four teams reported in during the next ten minutes. I left to join the pair who had located Jed Benson. While three of us charged the top of the pyramid, the other four teams would be at-

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tacking its base. Benson had several offices and apartments in Morgan City. Our first job had been to locate him. After that, all other action would fall neatly into place like the last few pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Benson had been found at one of his more ritzy residences. In addition to whatever employees and bodyguards he might keep close to him, a uniformed doorman, a switchboard attendant and an elevator operator also acted as buffers between him and visitors. I left Strangler Cady, a man with a face almost as scarred as mine, in the lobby to keep the doorman and switchboard attendant company. I didn't want anyone but myself to announce our arrival.

A girl about the age of my youngest daughter took us up to the penthouse floor. She tried to stand at a distance from us, but the elevator car was too small and we were too big. I had an impulse to put my hand on her shoulder to still her fears, but I knew it'd be misinterpreted, so I didn't.

"Stay here," I ordered as we left the car, and the girl nodded dumbly.

My companion was Bronco Devin. He'd once played a year of pro football before deciding it would be more profitable to sell protection to small shopkeepers. If he had been protecting them from anything or anyone except himself, he might never have seen the inside of a prison. As it was, he had served two years for racketeering.

When we reached Benson's door, I hit it high and Bronco hit it low. It tore from its hinges and flew into the middle of the livingroom where it came to rest after demolishing a coffee table. Bronco swung to the left and I turned to my right. The door hadn't slowed our momentum a bit. There was another closed door ahead of me and I raised my foot and applied the full force of my rush to the point just above the knob. The latch tore loose from the jamb and the door burst open. I came to a halt in the center of Jed Benson's bedroom.

Benson sat up in bed, clutching the covers with both hands and blinking his eyes rapidly to clear away the sleep. I pulled the blankets away, twisted my fingers in his hair, and yanked him to his feet. Pushing him ahead of me, I ignored his stream of questions and returned to the livingroom. Just then Bronco appeared with a pair of slightly abused bodyguards he had found in another part of the apartment. Neither of us had had to display a weapon, let alone fire a shot.

We tied and gagged the bodyguards, using some of Benson's expensive silk neckties to do the job.

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When it was Benson's turn to be tied, I found his puzzlement had evolved into a belligerence that was ridiculous coming from a naked man.

"What do you two think you're doing?" he demanded. His face was red and he showered us with saliva when he spoke. "I've got friends in this town! You can't get away with a thing like this!"

We tied his hands and feet without answering, but didn't gag him. Our lack of communication had more effect on him than any words we might have used. Shouts and threats he could have handled, but not silence. His belligerence quickly faded to cautious inquiry.

"Say, fellas, I don't know you two, do I? " he asked.

I picked up the phone and called the lobby. Cady answered on the first ring.

"Everything okay down there?" I asked.

"Yep, just fine."

"Good. Turn the switchboard over to the girl again and tell her to put through the calls that come in."

I replaced the phone and turned back to Benson. He seemed to be getting smaller. "Wha . . . What do you guys want from me?"

"Everything," I said. "Everything you have."

The phone rang and I answered it. A whining and puzzled voice asked to speak to Jed Benson.

"He can't come to the phone right now. What's your problem?"

"There's a couple of hard-looking characters here. They say I don't work for Jed anymore. It's crazy."

"No, that's right. You just got a twenty-five percent raise, and you don't work for Benson anymore. Give them whatever they want."

The other four teams were moving fast. Calls continued to come in and I handled them as I had the first one. Everyone who called was given a raise in pay and told to cooperate with the strangers. I knew my men were collecting written records and taking down verbal lists of customers, suppliers, and which police had to be paid off. Since no racket can exist without police complicity, it was important that I find out the name of every patrolman or detective who was looking the other way or supplying the much-needed protection.

Between phone calls, Bronco and I turned our attention back to Benson. I was after his account books and other records, and Bronco had discovered that the telephone stand was actually a small safe. It had been covered with wood and faced with a number of dummy drawers. We hadn't brought safecracking tools with us, so I politely asked Benson to give me the combination of the lock.

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Courtesy didn't work, so I raised the blinds and Bronco hung him out of the window by his heels until he changed his mind. We were twenty stories up; it didn't take Benson long to decide to give me the numbers.

I cleaned everything out of the safe—cash and records. I didn't need the money, but the documents were essential. As long as I had Benson's records, I didn't have to worry about him reorganizing and taking the rackets back. He couldn't possibly carry in his head all the information necessary to run the rackets. Without his records and the cash to buy back the people I had hired away from him, he was powerless. He couldn't even turn to his pet police because they knew they would get their payoffs no matter who ran things.

I untied the two bodyguards, gave them cigarettes and talked pleasantly with them for a few moments. Bronco said he was sorry he'd had to rough them up, and they said it was okay. They understood it was just business and he hadn't meant anything personal by it. When they looked at Benson their faces showed contempt. I hired them on the spot and gave them the job of answering the phone. They knew what to say because they had heard me use the same script over a dozen times.

Bronco brought a pair of leather suitcases from the bedroom, and I packed Benson's cash and records into them while he glared at me from his position on the floor. I suppose he felt he had nothing to lose—he'd already lost it all. I untied his hands and feet, and his courage flooded back with a rush.

"You'll be sorry—you'll see," he threatened while still sitting on the rug.

I picked up the suitcases and started to leave with Bronco and one of the bodyguards. As I reached the door, Benson shouted at me again, and I paused. "I hope . . . I hope the new mayor *does* shut down the rackets," he screamed.

"Let me worry about the new mayor," I said. "You worry about leaving the city. I don't want you here tomorrow."

I gave the building employees a hundred dollars each, and the bodyguard explained to them that everything had been a slight misunderstanding. Color returned to the elevator girl's cheeks, and we all parted friends.

The following two days were much like the first one. My men visited every drug peddler, gambler and call girl in the city and let them know they had a new boss. At the same time they enlisted loyalty by promising increased earnings, and collected all the information they

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could about each small segment of the rackets. In only three days I had it all; I was in complete control.

I called another meeting at my trucking company office and gave each of my men, including the two former bodyguards, a plane ticket to Chicago and a thousand dollars severance pay. I didn't need them anymore and they'd be too dangerous to have around. I had expected complaints, but didn't receive any. They were all smiling when they left for the airport, and Bronco said something about them having learned a few tricks and having plans of their own. That was okay with me. They could do whatever they wanted so long as they didn't do it here. Morgan City was my town.

That evening the newspaper mentioned rumors of a power struggle in the local rackets and speculated about how the new mayor would keep his promises to wipe them out. I wondered the same thing, so I went to his inauguration and listened to him take the oath of office. My wife Margie was there, too, looking proud and happy. She'd worked hard for his campaign, and shared his victory.

Later, I went to the mayor's office and asked him if his staff had found the carload of records interesting.

"We sure did," he said. "Every cop who was on the take is going on suspension immediately. They betrayed their trust and there will be charges filed against them." He put his hand on my arm and squeezed. "How in the world did you get all those small-time crooks to cooperate with you?"

"I told them they had a new boss and gave everyone a raise in pay. No one argues with a raise in pay."

He smiled. "No, I guess they don't, but they might have if they'd known it would last only a few days. They'll all be told they're out of business and watched. Anyone who steps out of line will be arrested. This is going to be the cleanest city in the state." He spoke with the same confidence he had always had when he was my commanding officer in Korea. "You've been a big help. I don't know how to thank you," he said.

I shrugged. "What are friends for?"

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Perhaps it is the lot of man, after all, to suffer and to die.

WHEN I'M ASKED what was the most interesting case I ever tried during my forty years on the bench, I answer according to my mood or the temperament of the person asking, sometimes recalling the Grainger affair, or the Valentine murders, or the State vs. Arrison. I never, never mention the Temperley case.

An early episode in my career, its various elements are altogether too hideous for dinner-table reminiscing, and even if a natural fastidiousness had not prevented me from discussing that bizarre incident, I could scarcely have done it full justice, for only part of the story ever appeared in the public records; the rest is known only to me. The reason I'm bringing it up at this point is that I must decide whether to include it in my memoirs now that I've finally got around to writing them. Should I draw attention to the case, it would acquire even at this late date a notoriety among the annals of forensic medicine and criminal jurisprudence that could do nothing but spotlight the weaknesses of a system that I reflect upon with increasing misgivings now that I'm no longer a functioning part of it.

It all happened a long time ago in a remote rural district in the extreme northwest corner of the state. The known facts are simple: Laura Temperley was tried, convicted, and executed for the premeditated murder of her husband, Dr. Asa

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Temperley. There was little sympathy for her either among the jury or the spectators; what scandalized them, aside from the atrocity of the deed itself, was that the victim had been a hero who had saved his wife from almost certain death less than a month before she blew his head off with a shotgun; moreover, the defendant's stony intransigence all through the trial only added to the public outrage.

"Why did you shoot your husband, Mrs. Temperley?" her coun-

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sel pleaded with her again and again.

"I had my reasons," is all she would answer, even when reminded from the bench, where I was presiding, that she was jeopardizing her own life by her conduct. She appeared not to care. Nothing seemed to touch her, not even my pronouncing the death sentence, which at the time was mandatory in that state for first degree murder.

Though public sentiment was so strongly against her, she might have swayed it had her attitude been as pitiable as her appearance. The visible ravages of the ordeal she had suffered up there on the mountain had lent nobility to features that had been remarkable only for their prettiness—and what eye could avoid that empty folded sleeve where her right arm was missing, a tragic mutilation that would surely have tempered the jury's hostility had she shown a glimmer of remorse; as it was, the empty sleeve served only to remind the panel of how Dr. Temperley had saved his young wife's life.

The epic nature of that story was as memorable as the winter itself, which had been one of historic severity in terms of snowfall and misery. Several human and scores of animal deaths had been linked to the great blizzard which had lashed the countryside for nearly two weeks. During the emergency, Dr. Temperley had worked day and night while burdened with the anxiety over his wife's disappearance.

Testifying at the trial as to the doctor's reaction to his wife's absence, his nurse, Miss Penney, wasted no sympathy on the defendant.

"He was worried sick, poor man, and bone-tired. I told him he ought to get some rest. Instead, he went after her."

"You mean he knew where she was, Miss Penney?"

"He rang up Joe Sweeney's Garage and found out Neal Robertson hadn't come in to work that day. So Doc knew they'd run off together."

"You're saying that Dr. Temperley went looking for his wife the same day she disappeared?"

"No, no, no. How could he? The blizzard had come by then. And he put his patients first. It was ten or twelve days later when he told me he was going after her. He said I wasn't to worry if he didn't come back right away."

"But he didn't tell you he was going to look for her at his mountain cabin."

"No. But I sort of got the idea he knew where she was."

Nothing came out at the trial that was not either known or surmised by everyone. Doc had already told the complete story when

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they were all brought down to the hospital. It seems that he had known for some time that his wife was having an affair with Neal Robertson and that they were in the habit of meeting at his hunting cabin up in the hills. Laura apparently thought it was a safe trysting spot. She knew Doc was too busy to go near the place more than once or twice a year; in fact, the only reason he owned the cabin was that a patient had given it to him in payment for an appendectomy.

Doc had told how he loaded his skis on his car and drove as far as Stanhope Junction. The snow had still been falling, adding to drifts that had uncannily reshaped the landscape and closed all but the one main road out of town. From the Junction he had skied up to the cabin. He told how the drifts had reached thirty feet in places and all but hidden the cabin from view. As he'd expected, Robertson and his wife were there, neither of them in a romantic mood. Neal's pickup had frozen, they had used up the last of the wood they'd gathered before the snow got too deep to wade through, and both of them were fighting exposure. Doc said that Laura's right arm was frostbitten and had gone into gangrene. To save her life, he had been forced to amputate the arm. Then he had kept her alive until a rescue party had managed to dig them out three weeks later.

Laura Temperley had been delirious when they brought her to the hospital. Robertson, a rugged, toughly handsome drifter, seemed not much the worse for his experience, which he refused to talk about. To everyone's surprise, he left town before Laura was out of the hospital, and no one had seen or heard from him since.

Less than a month later, when Laura was recuperating at home, she had greeted her husband with a loaded shotgun when he returned from his rounds one afternoon. A neighbor heard the shot and came running. Laura had calmly delivered herself into the sheriff's custody and from that moment until the instant of her death in the state prison had said nothing to vindicate herself.

Such was the story, a mixture of heroism, endurance, lust, compassion, and—presumably—malice, for it was assumed that Laura had murdered her husband because she believed he had driven her lover away. Since she made no objection when this motive was adduced at the trial, it was accepted as the truth.

Had that been the end of the affair, I might have included it in my memoirs as a matter of course, and should have had no qualms about

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discussing it around a dinner table. Its classic ingredients were inherently dramatic and it would have made a good story. However, it had a grim sequel known only to me—I've never confided it even to my wife—and few would be able to hear it without growing sick with horror, recounting as it does a tale of unspeakable human depravity.

Some twenty years after the Temperley trial, when I was on the state supreme court and had become a celebrity of sorts because of my liberal position on certain controversial issues of the day, I happened to receive a phone call from a stranger. He refused to give his name but implored me to come and see him. I explained that I had little free time and suggested he make an appointment to see me at my office. "I can't do that," he said with disarming simplicity. "I'm dying, you see."

Needless to say, I agreed to visit the man and found him, in truth, near death in a seedy rooming house in the skid-row district of the city. Even though I'd seen photographs of him years earlier, I should never have recognized him in his present shockingly wasted condition. He told me his name was Neal Robertson.

"I've got to get it off my chest, Judge," he whispered.

Whatever disease had fed upon the man's body, reducing it from the hulk of a giant's to that of a wizened invalid's, it had nothing left to consume save the bones themselves, while a telltale pallor already suggested that waxen transparency that precedes the final agony. I knew when I made them that my pleas that he be moved to a hospital were quite hopeless, and he brushed them aside with a movement of the hand, insisting he had little breath and less time and that all he wanted me to do was to listen.

"Thought of tellin' a priest, but it's gotta be someone who knew about it. Somebody who was there. Most of 'em are dead now, for all I know. I've read about you, Judge. I thought you'd be willin' to listen."

"I've been listening for thirty-five years," I told him. "I should be pretty good at it."

With that, he lay back, closed his eyes, and began to talk.

"There was nothin' about the case in the papers where I was. I never knew they convicted her till months after she was dead. You gotta believe that. You gotta believe I woulda gone back and told the truth. I don't know why she didn't tell 'em. It woulda saved her. I just don't understand. She musta wanted to die awful bad."

I asked him why he had left the town.

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"You'll know when I'm done, Judge. Let me tell it my own way."

For the sake of coherence, I'll summarize the first part of what he told me, for though his mind was clear enough he was inclined to wander from the point and to indulge in lengthy digressions of remorse or self-pity.

He told me how he had first met Laura Temperley when she came to the garage to have her car repaired. Almost at once something came alive between them, an excitement of the senses ignited by an awareness of how much they had in common: they were both young, attractive, and restless; and she, too, had known what it was like to be poor. It was because she had hated being poor that she had married Dr. Temperley and, even though he paid considerably more attention to his patients than to her, he was unreasonably jealous, giving her hell for smiling at the milkman or loitering too long in the shops. She soon discovered that his professional diligence was inspired less by compassion than by vainglory, and he revealed a sadistic streak that was always carefully hidden from his doting patients. Her life with him became unbearable.

At first she and Neal had met secretly, usually for brief after-dark walks along the river when the doctor was away on calls, but this did not satisfy Laura and soon they were meeting in her husband's hunting cabin back in the hills to the north of town. They had no idea he was aware of what was happening.

That winter they'd begun making plans to run away together. Neal knew that Laura was passionately in love with him and, though this tickled his ego, his own affections were far more casual; still, he was fond of her and when she proposed that they run off together it suited his purpose to agree; he was fed up with the town and with his grease monkey's job at the garage.

"That mornin' we were goin' to make our final plans. I met her at the edge of town in my pickup. It was just beginnin' to snow. By the time we got to the cabin it was comin' down pretty hard and there was a wicked north wind. We didn't really notice just how bad it was, though, and by the time we got around to talkin', there was a full-scale devil of a blizzard. Snow was already driftin'. When we got in the truck to go home, the damn thing wouldn't start. Laura went back inside to keep the fire goin' and I tried to get the engine started till the snow was near up to the door handle and I had to give up.

"By the next mornin' we'd burned up all the wood in the cabin and I fetched as much as I could

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from the woods before the snow was so deep you couldn't wade through it. We was both mighty hungry. When a whole day went by and the blizzard kept gettin' worse, we both got jumpy as hell. We kept just enough fire goin' to keep from freezin'. I knew that when the wood was gone we'd of had it. It was just a question which would get us first, hunger or cold. We'd either starve to death or freeze.

"The blizzard kept hammerin' night and day. The windows were covered with snow. We were as good as dead and buried, and I knew it. I felt a little crazy, like I was stoned outa my skull. I knew I was gonna die and I was scared as hell. When the wood was gone, we burned whatever was burnable in the two rooms of the cabin.

"I'd begun to lose track of time when he came. Doc, I mean. Just like he was makin' a call, with his little shiny black bag in his hand. And he gloated! He stood lookin' at us, both of us half-starved and half-froze and he started quotin' scripture at us! I was so damned weak I could scarce lift my arm. Laura was no better. And that devil stood there preachin' to us!

"I begged him to ski back to town and get food and help. We had to have food. You ever been hungry, Judge? I don't mean that little pinch in the gut when you miss a meal. I mean out of your skull with hunger. If I had a choice between freezin' to death and starvin', I'd choose freezin' any time. Doc said the blizzard was too bad. He'd never make it back to town. I begged him to try. He refused. He laughed. He seemed to be gettin' a kick out of our predicament. He managed to get some more wood from outside and he kept the fire goin', and all the time he kept jawin' at us about the wages of sin and retribution and a lot of other garbage like that. And we were so weak we could just about drag our carcasses around. If I'd been strong enough, I'd have taken his skis and tried to get to town myself, but I was too weak to open the door.

"Laura cursed him for a devil. She wouldn't open her mouth but to curse him.

"Doc only gloated. 'You think this drifter loves you, Laura?' he'd say.

" 'Yes! He does love me. Like you never did and never could.'

" 'Hear that, Robertson? She says you love her. That the truth?'

" 'Yes, dammit! I love her, Doc, an' ain't nothin' you can do about it.'

" 'I don't have to do anythin' about it,' he says, and he goes off into the other room like he can't stand the sight of us.

"Once he got real mad. Laura

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said to him, 'We're goin' away together, Neal and me.' Doc got a mean grin on his face and said real nasty-like, 'That right, Laura? You really believe that, do you?'

" 'I know it! You ain't gonna stop us.'

" 'Like I said, I don't have to. Don't you know you're both starvin' to death? Two, three days you'll be dead. Both of you.'

" 'No!'

" 'Nobody knows you're here. Or that I am. My car won't be dug out for days.'

" 'Go back and tell them!'

" 'Sorry, Laura. Can't do that. Not yet.'

" 'You want to watch us die, don't you? Monster!'

"Doc smiled, mean as sin, and said, 'It's my business to save people, Laura. You know that. All I want you to do is admit this grease monkey doesn't love you.'

" 'Never!'

"Then Doc said, 'I'll just have to prove how much he loves you, Laura, honey.' I don't know when this was. I think I was half out of my mind by then. Sometimes I thought he'd gone and left us. Then he'd come pussy-footin' outa that other room, grinnin' from ear to ear. I don't know how many days we were together, all three of us—the blizzard had stopped but the snow kept comin' down. Judge, if I wasn't on my way out of this world I'd never tell you the next part. Nobody'd ever understand less'n he knew what it was like to starve—or to think you was starvin', which is just as bad. To feel your guts dryin' up inside you and not to know how much longer you got. Not that it's any excuse, 'cause it ain't. Ain't no excuse for what I done, Judge. But of the two of us, old Doc and me, I guess the Lord would figger I was less to blame than him. He kept tellin' me how I was dyin', Judge. And he was a doctor. I figgered he oughta know. And I sure felt like I was dyin' and, Judge, I didn't want to die. I wanted to stay alive and that's all I wanted. And when the Doc give me a chance to live, I took it. Afterward, I pretended I didn't know what I'd done. But I knew, Judge. God knows I knew. And she knew . . . she knew.

" 'See what I got here, boy,' Doc said to me. He opened his black bag and showed me the scalpel and chloroform.

" 'Now, Robertson,' he said to me, 'in a fix like this, it's every man for himself. Sailors marooned on the high seas have had to face up to it and so do you. You love my wife enough to die for her, do you?'

"I just looked at him. He said, 'Hell, of course you don't. You and I know that, even if Laura doesn't. Well, I'm not askin' you to give up

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your life for her. I'm a lot more practical than that. All I'm askin' you to give her is your right arm. That nice big brawny right arm. That'll keep her in victuals till we're rescued, and you won't feel a thing, I promise you. I've got all I need right here in the bag. Think what a big hero you'll be if you do this for her.'

"We just stared at him, Judge. Laura laughed. We both thought it was his idea of a joke. But there was that mean, devilish smile on his face and I got an awful queer feelin' inside.

" 'Well, lover boy,' he said, 'you gonna take your shirt off while I melt some snow down and boil us some water?'

"And then I knew he wasn't jokin'. And I knew he was the devil. Laura and me watched him fill that old kettle with snow and set it on the grate. Then he looked at me and said, 'You mean to tell me you ain't willin' to give so much as an arm for my wife, boy?'

"I couldn't say a word and Doc threw back his head and roared, and he looked at Laura and said, 'You ready to admit now that this yellow belly doesn't love you?'

" 'No! He needs both his arms, you old fool. He needs his arms to hold me in for the rest of our lives. We're goin' to get out of here and be together years after you're buried in the ground!' she cried.

"Well, sir, that really burned the Doc. He was mad as hell, and he said to me, 'What about you? You going to dream about gettin' away even while you lie here and die? You want to live, don't you? Let her make the sacrifice for you.'

"I wouldn't answer him, and that's when he started all the talk about starvation and how it killed a man before he really knew what was happenin'; how I was already goin' out of my head and gettin' weaker and weaker and pretty soon I'd just close my eyes and that'd be it. And he talked about food and life and he kept after me and pretty soon I couldn't look at Laura no more, not at her face, nor in her eyes. But I couldn't stop lookin' at her body—at her arm. At her bare white arm. I kept seein' it even when I closed my eyes. I kept seein' that bare white arm, the flesh molded to the bone, and then somethin' went wrong in my head. I wanted so much to live. I couldn't let myself die like an animal in that log cabin tomb. *I had to live.*

"I swear I don't remember nothin' too clear after that. That's the truth, Judge. I just sorta gave up and let things happen. I didn't have no willpower left, Judge. I remember there was that water boilin', and the wind pickin' up again and shriekin' in the chimney, and Laura

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cryin', and I remember his tellin' me I wasn't strong enough to do nothin' but hold the rag to her face. And then I remember the stink of chloroform and I remember holdin' it to her face hard as I could, and I remember her screamin' and fightin' to tear loose of his arms . . . and that's all I remember till they came and took us away from there . . . until later . . . . then it came back . . . it all came back . . .

"And somethin' else came back, Judge. What Doc did after I'd—after it was all over. He took me in the other room and he showed me the cache of food under the floorboards. Said he'd just remembered. Showed me all those little oilskin packets of dehydrated food. Enough to last all winter. And I knew then why he hadn't been hungry and why he wasn't in no panic to get outa there.

"And when it all came back to me I hightailed it outa there. I ran away and I kept runnin', Judge. I just kept runnin' and runnin' and tryin' to forget."

In all my years on the bench I'd never listened to anything as gruesome and soul-sickening as Neal Robertson's story. It filled me with revulsion, and even though I loathed the poor wreck of a man who lay gasping out this horrible confession in that hole of a room, I couldn't help feeling a kind of pity for him—and for her.

"Why didn't she *tell* us!" I cried. "Why did she let us do it? Why didn't she tell the truth?"

His eyes were open now and staring blindly at the scarred ceiling. "Maybe she figgered it wasn't no use tellin' what really happened. Who would have believed it?" For the first time he turned his eyes full upon me and I caught a glimpse into the very pit of hell. And he said, "Would you have believed it, Judge? If I wasn't a dyin' man?"

As soon as I left him, I made arrangements for his removal to a hospital. A hopeless gesture, and I knew it: he died two days later without speaking another word to anyone. According to the doctor who treated him, it was not disease that killed him but malnutrition.

He had, quite literally, starved himself to death.

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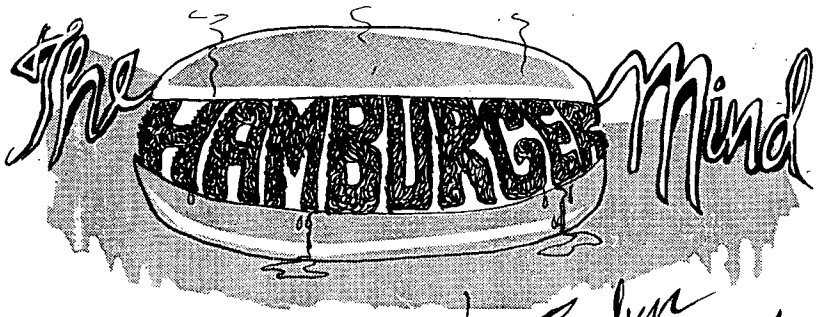
It has been noted that the False and the True are perhaps divided only by a hair.



by Evelyn Payne

I TOOK the matter up with Rhoda when the meat loaf appeared on my tray that night.

"This is the third time this week that you've served me ground meat in one form or another. I don't care for ground meat," I pointed out, trying to be as pleasant as possible. The memory of that phone call from Nellie still rankled, but I wasn't going to bring that up now.

Rhoda just stood there, her lower lip pushed out mulishly, her black eyes angry. Then she tossed her head, that absurd haystack hairdo of hers waving like a black balloon, and said, "Things are getting more expensive all the time, Tess. You don't realize it since you're not doing the buying. Hamburger is just as nutritious as—"

"I have plenty of money," I interrupted, "and I'm sure Harold gives you enough to run the house without being so parsimonious. Steaks and roasts aren't so easy for me to chew, but I like chicken, turkey, seafood. And no spaghetti. I'm particularly fond of lobster—"

She actually winced, and I remembered hearing how stingy she had been even as a child, always hoarding her money and begging pennies from visitors; and then she married that no-good husband and had to scrimp and save for years and years. No wonder she thought in terms of hamburger. Her clothes were always neat and clean, but

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they were obviously old and sometimes darned. The only thing in the world she spent money on was that hairdo of hers. She went to the beauty shop every week and came back with it blacker than ever, teased and shellacked so that no single hair dared stray from its appointed place. It might have been a wig; at any rate, I don't think she ever combed it herself.

"I'll make out some menus, and Maria knows how I like things fixed, so you won't have to bother with anything except the actual buying," I said, glancing out the window at the side yard. "Oh, and another thing. The garden looks dreadful. Hasn't the gardener been coming lately?"

"Oh, he wanted to raise his prices, so I let him go," she said casually. "We can't afford that much for a gardener."

"Of course we can," I snapped. "I'll take the matter up with Harold when he comes tomorrow."

She sniffed, the sniff suggesting that I was a gullible old fool and that Harold was probably robbing me blind. She didn't like him, although he was always very polite and nice to her. Perhaps she'd guessed that he had been opposed to my hiring her to run the house when I couldn't get around as well as I used to. But I'd felt sorry for my sister, who had had a mighty thin life, and I expect I'd been a little nostalgic about my only remaining relative (Harold is Tom's nephew, not mine). Of course that was silly because Rhoda is 15 years younger than I, and I'd been married and gone from home before she even started school.

Well, Harold had been right. Nellie Blair had told me on the phone that morning that Rhoda was going around insinuating that I was getting senile, losing my marbles. Oh, Rhoda hadn't said anything—it had been a matter of head shakes and gestures and pursed lips. I could visualize it—in six months I'd learned how Rhoda operated. She never wasted a word when a gesture or an expression would do.

As for my losing my marbles, it just wasn't so. True, I can't remember as well as I used to, but at 82 one has to let some things go, and I'd just as soon forget about the present—it's dull and rather frightening. Much more interesting to remember the past, to filter out the warm, exciting, happy things and hold them close. Since I had pneumonia six months ago I haven't been able to manage the stairs even with my cane, so my days consist mostly of eating, taking the medicine Dr. Stanhope prescribes, reading and watching TV. Of course I have occasional visitors and phone calls from old friends, and then

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there's Harold, who comes once a week. I really look forward to that.

I'm very fond of him, and he seems to return the sentiment. He takes care of my affairs and, most important, he still treats me as if I were an interesting person, one he really enjoys visiting with, not just an old nuisance. I gave him power of attorney right after Tom died ten years ago, so I don't have to worry about anything—except these little spells of confusion that come over me now and then. I suppose that's why Rhoda thinks I'm losing my mind. I break out in perspiration first, then everything gets confused and sometimes I fall. I guess I must say some rather strange things because when I begin to clear up I notice that Rhoda's face is longer and more disapproving than ever—if that's possible—and Maria, who's cooked for me for eighteen years, pats my arm and says tenderly, *"Pobrecita, pobrecita."* It hasn't happened very often, and otherwise, except for occasional lapses of memory, I'm in pretty good shape. I only use glasses for reading and I can hear as well as ever.

I don't know why Rhoda wants to make out that I'm getting senile. Maybe she thinks that somehow she can get hold of some of my money. I'm a rich woman. Tom made a lot and we never had any children. I'd have liked children, but it didn't happen and, after all, I had Tom, who made up for everything.

Thursday afternoon Harold came as usual. He's always prompt, the dear boy. Of course he's not a boy anymore except to someone my age. He's fifty if he's a day; still handsome, but a lot fatter than he used to be and beginning to gray a little at the temples. He's always very carefully dressed, and he smokes far too many cigars, cutting the ends off with a little gold cutter I gave him once for Christmas. I tease him sometimes about not being up to the minute—mod, I think they call it—and he always laughs and admits that he's a square from away back. "If I have to go barefoot and dirty and wear my hair like a King Charles spaniel, why then I'm content to be out of fashion," he says comfortably.

He climbed the long marble stairs to the second floor and came into my room, puffing a little. He leaned over and kissed my cheek.

"How are you, Aunt Tess? Still as pretty as ever. You look younger than most of my contemporaries," he said flatteringly.

"It's good to see you, Harold. I always look forward to Thursdays," I said, patting his arm.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked, sitting down at the table and putting his briefcase down.

"Oh, I'm fine, just fine."

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"Now, you come sit over here by me at the table," he went on, helping me to a chair and seating me.

I like these little attentions from men. That's where I think these Women's Lib people are wrong. What's the matter with a little politeness between the sexes? It does grease the wheels of communication, I think. Unless, of course, your idea of communication is yelling at each other.

I got out an ash tray from the table drawer, and he opened the briefcase and took out some papers.

"Now, Aunt Tess, I thought it advisable to get rid of your Merriwell stock and put the money into bonds. There have been some rather disturbing rumors about Merriwell lately and I thought it better to be on the safe side. Oh, I realized a nice profit for you—Tom bought them so long ago," he explained, and then launched into a disquisition on the market in general and Merriwell in particular.

He's nice about pretending that I understand what it's all about, and I listen intently and try to ask a few reasonably intelligent questions. I trust him implicitly, but even if he were robbing me, as Rhoda implies, I wouldn't really care. Most of it is going to be his one of these days, and I know he'll keep me living in the way I prefer as long as possible. He even offered me a home with him and his wife, who's a dear too, right after Tom died, but I wouldn't consent to that. This is my house and I intend to stay here as long as I can.

When he had finished with that and returned the papers to the briefcase, I said, "I want to talk to you about Rhoda. You were right and I was wrong."

He listened attentively while I told him about the hamburger and the gardener, and then he exclaimed, "But that's absurd. I give her $500 a month to run this house. I'll talk to her."

I mentioned her implication that he was mishandling my money and he simply laughed, but when I got around to the phone call from Nellie he was furious.

"I'll fire her right now, the b—I'm sorry, Aunt Tess, but—" He stood up and then sat down again. "No, it would be better to send her a letter from the office, enclosing a final check. I suppose she's overhearing all this," he added, glancing at the open door, "but no matter. In the meantime, I'll check on that other woman who applied for the position as housekeeper. She sounded pretty good to me."

"I'll go by your recommendation this time," I said meekly. "But I never thought that a sister of mine—"

"She has a small mind, thinks of

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nothing but money, a—a hamburger mind, you might say. Because she's a penny pincher and a cheat herself, she thinks everyone else is, too. But enough of that. I brought those pictures of the grandchildren with me today," he said, pulling some snapshots out of his pocket.

They were darlings, those two little boys. We had a nice talk about the family and Tom. Harold is practically the only one I can talk to about Tom these days.

Finally he looked at his watch and rose. It was getting close to five and there were shadows coming into the corners. He picked up the ash tray and took it into the bathroom to empty it. When he came out he left the mirrored door ajar.

"Much as I've enjoyed this, Aunt Tess, I have to leave. Have to go home and dress for a charity dinner."

"You do too much of that civic work. You should take it easier," I said, handing him his hat.

"I know, I know. Next year I'm going to take it easier, say no to some of these jobs. In the meantime, though, I have to finish what I started." He bent over and kissed my cheek. "See you next Thursday. First thing tomorrow morning I'll attend to her," he added, jerking his head in the direction of Rhoda's bedroom.

He walked out, and I lay back in my chair and shut my eyes. Visitors do tire me, much as I enjoy them. I wasn't even up to walking over to shut the bathroom door, although I'm usually pretty particular about such things. Then I heard the door of Rhoda's room open—you can't fool me about any of the sounds of this house, I've lived here too long—but I heard no footsteps, which was odd, because she walks loudly, on her heels. I opened my eyes and looked into the mirror on the bathroom door, which reflected the hall. She was tiptoeing toward the stairs. I sat up then and watched. What was she up to now?

Harold had stopped at the top of the staircase and taken out a cigar and the little gold cutter, and then suddenly Rhoda was behind him, pushing at his back with all her strength. His arms flew up, the briefcase dropping and the cigar flying through the air, and he fell. The sound of his scream and the thumping of his body down those stairs will stay in my ears forever. I heard the kitchen door open and Maria come running, screaming too. Then and only then, did Rhoda scream and rush down the stairs.

I got up, took my cane and went out into the hall and looked down. The two women were standing over Harold, and I could see from where I was that his neck was twisted peculiarly, and I knew he was dead.

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For a moment my heart seemed to stop beating. Then I heard Rhoda go to the phone and begin dialing. I moved closer and peeked over the balustrade. She was directly below me.

"Dr. Stanhope," she was saying, "Harold MacDonald fell down the steps here at the house. I think he's dead. Will you come at once? Oh, I'm going to call the police, but it's Tess I'm worried about. You see, Harold didn't slip. Tess—well, poor thing, I guess she didn't know what she was doing. She gave him—I hate to say this—she pushed him."

It was as though someone had thrown ice water in my face. She was blaming me! For a second or two I could hardly think. I took a step forward and felt something under my foot. Absently, I reached down and picked it up. It was the tip of Harold's cigar. I stood there, holding the thing, and listened to her rattle on.

"Oh, I wasn't anywhere near or I'd have stopped her. I was just opening the door of my room. You'd better be prepared to take care of her. She's dangerous, out of her mind."

Oh, it was all very clear then. With Harold out of the way and me certified as a dangerous lunatic, Rhoda would get herself appointed my guardian and she'd have the money and the house all to herself. This was what she'd been aiming at all these months. I tried to think. I would have to fight, but what was there to fight with? Maria would be on my side, but she hadn't seen it happen. Besides, her testimony would be disregarded because she was uneducated. Dr. Stanhope would be on my side too, probably, but he only saw me about once a month, and by the time Rhoda had further exaggerated the odd spells I had and had given a graphic description of what she had "seen," I'd be a dead duck. Maybe there were medical tests, but I didn't know, and I couldn't wait for that. I had to do something now. Then suddenly I had an idea—not a very good one, perhaps, but something.

Rhoda was still on the phone, talking to the police this time. I leaned over the balcony and dropped the cigar end down. As I'd hoped, it landed on top of her hair. She didn't seem to notice it, thank goodness. I tiptoed back into my room and lay down on the bed. I didn't weep—I had used up all my tears when Tom died—but there was a vast hurt inside me, and a terrible fear.

Maria came rushing up the stairs. "Oh, *senora*," she cried, gathering me into her arms and rocking me a little, as one comforts a sick child. "I hear her. And I know it is not true. You do not kill him! *Nunca*!"

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"I know, and we'll prove it somehow, Maria," I said, heartened by her love. "There, there's the doorbell. That will be the doctor. And I hear sirens."

I lay up there waiting. I couldn't hear what was being said, but no doubt Rhoda was giving a full account. Then I heard them coming up the stairs. I got up off the bed and stood, leaning on my cane.

Dr. Stanhope came to my side, anger and sympathy commingled in his expression. He took my pulse, looked at me sharply, and demanded, "Are you all right, Tess?"

I nodded and he said bluntly, "Tess, Rhoda says you pushed Harold down the stairs. Is that true?"

I was equally blunt. "She's lying. She did it herself. Crept up behind him and pushed. That mirror was just that way—I was sitting in that chair and I could see the hall and the top of the steps. I watched her do it."

The chief of police, Oliver Smith, looked doubtful. Rhoda belonged to his church and no doubt he was aware of her little insinuations about my sanity. Finally he said, "Perhaps we'd better call Rhoda up here."

She came up and sat herself down in the chair farthest away from me, trying to look afraid.

I said coldly, "Don't make such a play of being afraid of me, Rhoda. I won't hurt you even though you've lied about me."

She straightened up. "You did it. I saw you with my own eyes. I've been afraid of you for a long time. You're nuts. A lot of old people get that way."

I turned to the chief. "I'll tell you what happened this afternoon." I went through what I'd told Harold about the hamburger and the gardener, and Maria suddenly interrupted, "She no pay me what the *senora* did. I only stay because I love the *senora* and I am afraid of what this *malcriada* do to her."

"Rhoda probably overheard what we said. The door was open," I went on. "And I told Harold that I had had a phone call from Nellie Blair yesterday morning, and she told me that Rhoda was intimating that I was losing my mind."

"I never said a word," Rhoda said indignantly. "Besides, you didn't have a phone call yesterday morning."

"Oh, yes, I did. Nell called while you were in town marketing. Anyway, Harold was furious about that. He got up and started to go fire her right then, but finally he decided to send her a letter of dismissal and a final check from the office in the morning. So she crept up behind him and pushed."

"Why, you lying devil!" she screamed at me. "I wasn't any-

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where near when he fell. I was at the door of my room and that's a good twenty feet away."

"Then what's that in your hair?" I asked, moving closer to her. "It looks like the end of a cigar. Harold's cigar. If you were so far away, how did it get into your hair?"

She yelped and started to reach up, but the doctor grabbed her arm. "Look at it, Chief. It does look like a cigar end."

Very carefully the chief picked it out of her hair. "Hell, that's what it is, all right."

"It isn't, it can't be," she cried. "I wasn't anywhere near him. You put it there, Tess. You must have."

"I wasn't anywhere near you until five minutes ago when you came into this room. Maria can testify to that," I pointed out coldly.

Maria nodded vigorously. "The *senora* stay up here. The other one," there was infinite scorn in her voice, "stay downstairs."

"Then it must have flown back and hit my hair," Rhoda insisted desperately.

"The cigar was at the top of the stairs, the cutter a few steps farther down," Oliver Smith said. "That cigar end wouldn't have gone very far. Too light."

"Maybe you'd better check into her bank account," I went on. "She's been getting $250 a month salary and $500 a month to run the house on. She bought the cheapest food, fired the gardener, reduced Maria's pay. Where did the money go?"

Oliver Smith nodded. "Yeah, that's a point. What'd you do with it, Rhoda?"

She looked around at the doctor, who looked furious, and then at the chief, who looked highly doubtful, and began to whimper, "If you only knew what it is to be poor, really poor, dirt poor. And there she is with all that money and nothing to do but sit around and be waited on. I was only trying to lay up something for my old age. And then Harold was going to fire me and I'd be poor again. I had to kill him, I *had* to."

They've all gone now. The doctor gave me a shot, and the chief apologized for something—perhaps for believing Rhoda's innuendos. Maria has gone to make me a cup of tea, and Harold has gone forever. I'm all alone, and the perspiration is beginning to break out on my forehead. Maybe this will be a good one, one from which I'll never recover.

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In this big wide world, one instinctively learns a little, lives a little—and vice versa.

The Soft Asylum

by Edward D. Hoch

LIEUTENANT FLETCHER took the call just as he was going off duty. Ordinarily he would have turned it over to the night shift, but there was something in Vincent's voice on the phone that made him glance toward the inner office to see if Captain Leopold were still at his desk.

He went into the captain's office and said, "We've got a bad one. I thought you might want to take it yourself."

Leopold glanced up, saw the in-

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tent expression on Fletcher's face, and asked, "What is it?"

"A shooting down on LaGrange. College kids. Three or four dead."

Leopold said, "We'd better go."

LaGrange Street was an area of big old houses which had been sold and resold over the years, cut up and modernized into as many apartments as the zoning laws allowed. A few years back it had been a popular area with singles—unmarried office girls and young men just out of college—but the character of

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the neighborhood was changing rapidly. People were moving in all along LaGrange, driven out of the center city by massive urban renewal projects still far from completion. Students from the university were moving in, too, attracted by the street's growing reputation for communal living arangements and easy narcotics.

Every city has its LaGrange Street these days. Leopold's city was no different, and he lived in constant fear that some spark might trigger real trouble there. This spark, this shooting of four young students on a hot summer's afternoon, might be the one he'd been dreading.

Detective Harry Vincent was standing in front of the house with two uniformed patrolmen when Fletcher pulled in to park at the curb. He nodded to Leopold and said, "It's a bad one, Captain, like I told Fletcher. Blood all over. A mess."

Leopold nodded, glancing at the gathering crowd of curious spectators. "Keep these people back," he told one of the officers. Then he noticed the ambulance with its back door standing open. "Somebody still alive?"

"One of the kids, but he's bad. Might not last to the hospital."

"Is he conscious?"

"No."

They went up the front steps with Vincent in the lead, then stood aside as the ambulance attendants came out carrying a body on their stretcher. They'd bandaged his head to stop the bleeding, but there was enough of his face uncovered to reveal a youth with long sideburns and sunken cheeks. He looked more dead than alive at that moment.

"Got any names?" Leopold asked as they headed up the stairs to the second floor.

"The one they just took out is Bill Joshings. He was a senior at the university, along with the three dead ones."

"A senior?"

"Would have been in September, anyway. They were all taking summer courses."

Another cop was standing white-faced at the head of the stairs, trying not to be sick. They went into the room and Leopold caught his breath. Two boys were crumpled on the floor, one naked, the other wearing pajama bottoms. They'd been shot several times at close range, and their bodies seemed punctured and gashed and defiled. There was blood everywhere, on the walls and floor and even a spattering of it on the ceiling.

Vincent motioned toward the bed. "Joshings, the wounded one, was sprawled across that. The other dead one's in here." He led them to

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the bathroom and pointed to the white-tiled shower stall. Another boy was crumpled inside, his head thrown back as if in surprise. He'd been shot only once, a contact wound to the right temple. The gun lay between his legs in a puddle of water and blood.

"Wearing shorts," Leopold observed. "He wasn't taking a shower."

"No."

"Think he killed the others and then himself?"

"Looks like it," Vincent admitted.

Fletcher pulled at his lower lip. "Or else he heard the shooting and was hiding from the killer in here."

Leopold returned to the other room. "Get the photographers and technicians to work." Then, "Who called you, Vincent? One of the neighbors?"

The detective shook his head. He was tall and dark-haired and new on the force. Leopold knew he'd had some luck with robbery cases, but that was all. "I was next door checking out some stolen loot, Captain. All of a sudden I heard the shooting. It sounded like a war over here."

"What time?"

"Just four o'clock. I remember thinking my shift was over and I'd better head back and report in."

"See anything when you got here that might prove useful?"

"Like a killer running away? Not a thing, Captain. But I came in the front. There's a back way and also a fire escape."

"No witnesses?"

"The couple downstairs are away on vacation. The guy in the back apartment's at work. Nobody else in the house."

"How many shots did you hear?"

"Maybe a dozen. Believe me, I came up with my gun out."

"All together, or maybe a space before the last one?"

Vincent thought about that. "You mean the kid in the shower? Yeah, there could have been thirty seconds or so before the last shot. I'm not sure."

"The shower stall might have muffled it," Fletcher pointed out. "These old houses have pretty thick walls."

Leopold carefully opened a couple of drawers. He had no idea what he was looking for, unless it was marihuana or something stronger. "How about the dead boys? Anybody identify them?"

"The landlord says the one in the shower is Mark Conway. The other two are named Frazier and Magrone, but he's not sure which is which."

"I'll want to talk to the landlord," Leopold decided.

"He's waiting downstairs. He

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lives directly across the street."

Leopold went down while Fletcher continued searching the apartment. It was hot in the street, and he supposed it had been hot in the apartment too, though he hadn't realized it until now. The crowd had tripled in size with the arrival of more police cars and the morgue wagon. He let his gaze wander over the curious faces, white and black and every shade in between, searching for one face that might betray more than mere curiosity.

Vincent appeared with a stocky man named Valdez, who proved to be the landlord. "I own this house and the one I live in, across the street," he explained. "I rent to good people; college boys, young married couples. Never any trouble before."

"You've got trouble now. Tell me about those kids."

Valdez shrugged. "Nothing to tell. They move in last September. Four of them. Good kids. The Conway kid always pay the rent. Rich parents, I guess."

"Why do you say that?"

"Sometimes checks from his father."

"Were they smoking pot up there?"

"No, I don't allow that."

"But were they doing it anyway?"

The landlord shifted uneasily, glancing first at Detective Vincent and then at the crowd of spectators some distance off. "Hell, I don't know, Captain. They have parties, sure. But they good kids. You know?"

"I know," Leopold sighed. "I'll talk to you later, Mr. Valdez."

By the following morning the story had made the wire services and the national news broadcasts. All four students were the product of wealthy homes, and the fact that the police refused to rule out the possibility of a murderer still at large tantalized the press. Bill Joshings still clung to uncertain life in the hospital's intensive-care ward, and while he breathed, Leopold held out the hope that he might regain consciousness long enough to tell his story.

Until then, Leopold refused to speak with the press, and when Fletcher entered his office to say there was a man demanding to see him, he merely snorted. "Another reporter looking for tomorrow morning's lead?"

"Not this time, Captain. It's Frederick Conway, the father of Mark Conway."

"Send him in."

Talking to the parents of murder victims was never pleasant. Talking to the father of a possible murderer was even less so. Frederick Conway was a middle-aged man who wore

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his hair long in imitation of youth. His clothes were obviously expensive, and his manner was one of pleading persuasion. He was used to having his way.

"Captain, I have to get to the bottom of this thing. They showed me Mark's body, and one of the detectives implied that my son had committed suicide after killing those other boys."

"He shouldn't have told you that. The investigation is still in progress."

"Are you telling me my son might be a murderer? Is that the news I'm supposed to take back to his mother? That he shot his three closest friends and then took his own life?"

The man made Leopold uncomfortable, asking for assurances he wasn't prepared to give. "We're investigating all aspects of the tragedy, Mr. Conway. As soon as we have anything certain—"

"And when will that be?"

"As you know, young Joshings is still alive. If he regains consciousness he may be able to tell us what happened."

"Joshings was Mark's best friend. He visited with us during the Christmas holidays."

"Did they seem to get on well?"

"Perfectly."

"What about girls?"

"The usual, I suppose. Mark had a girl over in Yonkers that he saw sometimes on weekends."

"Do you have any other children, Mr. Conway?"

"A daughter, younger than Mark. My wife is with her now."

"What about drugs? Any hint that your son was smoking pot or taking something stronger?"

"Must it always come down to that these days?"

Leopold shifted in his chair. "There's a lot of it on LaGrange Street. I have to ask."

"The answer is no. Mark didn't use drugs, and I'm sure the others didn't either."

"All right. Thank you for stopping by, Mr. Conway."

The long-haired man stood up, hardly ready to be dismissed. "But I came here for some sort of assurance, Captain. You've given me none."

"It's too soon to say what happened yesterday. The evidence seems to indicate your son fired the fatal shots, but evidence has been wrong before."

"You'll never convince me that Mark killed anyone."

"I won't try, unless it's true."

Leopold saw him to the door, then went back to his desk. He wished there were something better, more hopeful, that he could have told Frederick Conway.

Fletcher came in with the morn-

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ing coffee, slumping into his favorite chair. "What did he want, Captain? Reassurances?"

"Something like that. What's the word on Joshings?"

"No change. He's still unconscious."

"Where does that leave us, Fletcher?"

"I've got a girl outside you might want to question. Rona Reynolds. She was at the university with them, and she dated Joshings a few times."

"Does she know anything?"

"I'll let you judge that, Captain. She's got an odd story."

"Send her in. I'm in the mood for odd stories."

Rona Reynolds was a tall, slim beauty, dressed in white slacks and a tight blouse that accented the thrust of her bra-less bosom. Leopold looked once, then dropped his eyes to the desk until she was seated.

"Captain Leopold?"

"Yes. I understand you know Bill Joshings."

"I know them all, or knew them—before this happened."

"Can you think of any motive for the shootings?"

"None whatsoever."

"Did they get along well? No jealousies, fights over girls?"

"Nothing like that."

"Lieutenant Fletcher said you had a story," Leopold prompted.

She cleared her throat. "Yes, I do. But I don't know just where to begin." Her hands were busy in her lap, twisting the fringe of her shoulder bag.

"Just tell it like it happened. Like you told Lieutenant Fletcher."

"Well, we all turn on—you know?"

"Pot?"

"Mostly. Some of the kids are into stronger stuff."

"What about those four?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think one of them was selling the stuff. Dealing."

"How'd you find that out?"

"I was dating Bill Joshings. One night after the movies he brought me back to the apartment early. I guess he was short of money and thought we could have some beers back there."

Leopold interrupted. "When was this?"

"Just before final exams. The last Friday night in May, I think."

"All right. Go on."

"We came back, and surprised the other three. I remember Mark Conway was standing at the card table, and there was a man I didn't know bent over it, with lots of little plastic bags. I couldn't see what was in the bags. Mark swept them off the table into a cardboard box as soon as he saw me."

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"The other two? Frazier and Magrone?"

"Yes, they were there, too."

"Who was this man you mentioned?"

"I said I didn't know."

"Young, old? Black, white?"

"A white man with a beard. I think he was young, but I couldn't be sure with the beard. They called him Pete."

"What do you think was in the bags?"

She shrugged. "Pot, I suppose."

"Why hide pot from you? I thought you all used it."

"We do, a little. Maybe it was something else."

"Did you ask Joshings about it?"

"Yes, but he just laughed it off. He said it was nothing."

"And the man with the beard?"

"Well, that's why I came down this morning. He was there yesterday. At the apartment."

"How do you know?"

"His picture's in the morning paper."

Startled, Leopold reached for the paper at his elbow and spread it out on the desk. Rona Reynolds bent over to point at a picture on the front page, which showed a crowd of curious LaGrange Street residents watching while one of the bodies was carried out. The man she indicated was in the front row. He was perhaps about thirty, with a full bushy beard. He was not looking at the shrouded body or at the camera. Instead, he was staring intently at Detective Harry Vincent.

Fletcher came in shortly after Rona Reynolds left the office. "Not bad, huh?"

"You're a married man," Leopold reminded him. He tore the picture from the paper and handed it across the desk. "This is the man she saw in the apartment. See if you can get a line on him. You might start by asking Vincent if he's seen him around that neighborhood."

"I'll get on it, Captain."

"What did the medical examiner have to report. Any sign of drugs?"

"The easiest test is for heroin, and none of them were on that. But they could have been taking something else. There's no way of detecting LSD in a body."

Leopold played with a pencil on his desk. "How many shots were fired in all?"

"As near as we can tell, there were 12. Joshings was shot three times; the head wound that has him unconscious, and twice more in the chest. Frazier was shot four times, and Magrone three times. We've found holes from one bullet that apparently went through a chair back and broke the window without hitting anyone. And, of course, the twelfth shot killed Conway."

"That means the killer had to re-

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load at least once, if all the bullets came from the same pistol."

"They did, but he didn't have to reload. The murder weapon was a Browning 9mm automatic, 13 shots. There was still an unused bullet in the chamber."

Leopold grunted. "What about Conway? Could he have done it?"

"Sure. We tested to see if he'd fired a gun, and the result was positive, but those tests are far from foolproof. Maybe he killed them and maybe he didn't. If we had some idea of motive I'd be a lot more inclined to buy it."

"One of the boys was nude. The others weren't wearing much. Anything in that?"

Fletcher shook his head. "They weren't queer, if that's what you mean. Hell, Captain, it was a hot day and they were lounging around. The apartment was like a college dorm to them."

"I suppose so," Leopold admitted. "Maybe we're just trying to find a mystery where none exists. Maybe young Conway just killed them because it was so damn hot, and then he went into the shower and killed himself."

"You believe that, Captain?"

"I don't know, Fletcher. Let's talk to the man in this picture, and then maybe we'll have something."

That was easier said than done. Harry Vincent studied the newspaper photograph at some length, scratching his head and staring off into space. Finally he decided he didn't know the man. Fletcher next showed it to a number of beat cops with the same result. It was not until the following morning, when he sought out the newspaper photographer who'd taken the shot, that he found a lead.

"Sure, I've seen him around," the man told Fletcher. "He lives near there someplace, on LaGrange."

"Know his name?"

The photographer thought about it, then shook his head. "But I'd know it if I heard it."

"Pete?"

"Sure, that's it. Pete Gabriel. I think he used to have a job with the city. Parks Department or something like that. Don't know what he does now."

An hour later, Fletcher was in Leopold's office. "This is the guy, Pete Gabriel. He lives right next door to the murder scene. He was a playground supervisor for the city till he got fired about six months ago."

"Why was he fired?"

"Caught him selling marihuana to high school kids. The charge was dismissed in court because of a faulty arrest information, but the city fired him anyway."

Leopold stood up. "Let's go talk

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to him. He might know something."

Pete Gabriel came to the door after they'd been knocking for several minutes. He rubbed his eyes, stared hard at them and said, "I was sleeping. What do you want?"

Leopold showed his badge. "Police."

"The charges were dismissed. I'm clean."

"It's about the killings two days ago."

He swung open the door and allowed them to enter. "You can come in, but I don't know a thing about it."

Fletcher stood by the door while Leopold moved to the center of the room, passing his eyes over crowded bookshelves and dusty tabletops. "You knew the dead boys," he said, making it a statement rather than a question.

Pete Gabriel ran his hand through long, matted hair. "Hell, maybe I saw them in the street once or twice, waved hello. That was all."

"We have a witness to place you in their apartment."

"What—"

"You were selling them narcotics, Pete. We know it."

"I told you I beat that rap."

"This is a different rap, Pete. Murder. You won't beat this one."

"I didn't kill—"

"Then who did?"

"How the hell should I know? I just heard the shots, like everyone else."

"What were you doing in their apartment a few weeks back?" Leopold asked.

"I guess I stopped in for a beer one night. That was all."

Leopold gestured toward the bookshelves. "I see you read a lot."

"Yeah."

Leopold reached out a hand toward one of the shelves and Pete asked, "Got a search warrant?"

"Do I need one to look at a book?"

"Damn right you do! I know my rights."

"All right," Leopold agreed. "Maybe we'll be back."

They went down the stairs to the street. When they reached the car Fletcher asked, "What were you looking for, Captain? Pot hidden in hollowed-out books?"

"Maybe something like that. It got a rise out of him, anyway."

"Where to now? Back to headquarters?"

Leopold was staring up at the house next door, at the second-floor windows now vacant and shaded. "I think I'll look around here first. I'll get back on my own. One of the patrol cars will give me a lift."

He had a key to the locked apartment, and he entered it with a feeling of one stepping into some Pha-

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raoh's tomb after the dust of centuries had been allowed to settle. It was hard to remember that the room had been the scene of a slaughter only two days earlier. The bed was still rumpled and bloody, the walls and ceiling still speckled with scarlet, yet it all seemed a long time ago. He stood at the window, pulling back the shade to stare down at LaGrange Street, trying to see what they had seen, but all he saw was the street, and he wondered if that was enough; the street, and this apartment.

He saw a man weaving down the sidewalk, his mind fogged by drugs or alcohol, and wondered how many more like him lurked behind the windows on LaGrange. The street, and its rooms, had become a sort of soft asylum for the misfits of the city, catering to their needs and giving them shelter. He hated to see the young people joining in, linking their lives to this dead end of drugs and sex and ultimate despair.

Turning back to the room, Leopold started retracing the routine his men would have followed earlier. He studied the bloodstains and the bullet holes, spending some time by the bed where Bill Joshings had been found. Then he went into the bathroom and leaned into the shower stall to inspect the tiles. This was where the last of them had died, and this was where the secret lay—if he could just decipher it.

Last of them? What if Mark Conway had died first, and the others had then been killed because they'd witnessed it? He could imagine the murderer returning to leave the gun by Conway's body, then departing by the back stairs or fire escape. It might have been.

Leopold's thoughts were interrupted by a sound at the door. Someone was fumbling with the lock. He stepped quickly behind a drape and drew the revolver from his belt holster. The apartment door swung slowly open and he saw the girl, Rona Reynolds, enter.

"Hello again, Miss Reynolds." He stepped into view, putting the gun away.

She jumped back, startled, and seemed about to run. Then she thought better of it and closed the door behind her. "I thought the police were finished here."

"We're never finished until a case is closed. You didn't tell me you had a key."

"I must have forgotten." She was nervous and unsure of herself, and Leopold knew it was just the time to keep her off guard.

"Suppose you tell me the truth this time, Miss Reynolds. I've questioned Pete Gabriel and he denies everything. He says he was up here that night having a beer."

"He killed them," she said sim-

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ply, softly, almost without emotion.

"Why?"

"I—" She turned, close to tears. "You're going to lock me up, aren't you?"

"Not if you haven't done anything."

"I've heard about you. Captain Leopold, the detective who always gets his man. They say in the papers that you're heartless."

"Not always."

"Maybe if you had children of your own, you'd understand about us—Bill and Mark and me and the others."

"Maybe I could still understand, if you'd give me a chance."

She walked to the bed and sat down at its edge, avoiding the dried bloodstains. "What I told you was true. Pete was supplying them with drugs."

"What kind of drugs? Hard stuff?"

"Mostly cocaine. They sold it along the street. One of them, Frazier, had an ice cream route in the neighborhood. You know, he'd drive a little white truck down the street ringing a bell and the kids would come out. Only along LaGrange, the adults came out too. The cops never tumbled, and it helped pay their way through college."

"Just Frazier?"

"All of them, or at least Conway and Magrone, too. They took turns driving the truck. Bill Joshings told me he didn't like to do it, and I don't think he ever did."

"Why didn't you tell me this yesterday?"

"I told you about Pete and the plastic bags. I figured that was enough. I didn't want to get involved."

"Joshings gave you a key to this apartment."

"Yes," she admitted. "I was in and out a lot."

"And you came here today to search for the rest of the cocaine."

"I—"

"No point in denying it."

"I suppose not. You're right. I got to thinking about what I'd told you yesterday, about Pete and everything, and I was afraid you'd try to implicate Bill if he recovers. I thought it would be better to remove the cocaine before you found it."

"You knew we hadn't found it?"

She smiled slightly. "The boys had a good hiding place."

"Suppose you show me."

She got up and led the way into the bathroom. Using a dime as a screwdriver, she unscrewed one end of the inch-thick tubing that served as a rod for the shower curtain. She tipped the tubing slightly and shook it, and a number of small plastic packets slid out into her hand. They

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were filled with a white powder.

"That's it," she said.

"Any more?"

"No. This is all. They didn't like to keep too much in the apartment. And, of course, Pete was right next door."

There were eight packets in all, each weighing about two ounces. Leopold gathered them up and put them into his pockets. "Wait here," he said. "I'm going to call headquarters for a car."

"You're arresting me?"

"No, but I want you to come downtown and make a statement. We won't keep you long."

He dialed headquarters and asked for Lieutenant Fletcher. "I'm coming in with Miss Reynolds. Can you have a car stop by for me?"

"Sure, Captain. Frederick Conway's waiting to see you, too."

"Tell him I'll be tied up for a while. Anything else?"

"Good news from the hospital. Joshings is coming around. His life signs are improving and the doctor thinks he may be conscious and able to make a statement by tonight."

"That's the best news I've heard all day. Send that car."

He hung up and went back to Rona Reynolds. "Come on, Miss Reynolds. I won't keep you long."

When they reached headquarters, the visitors' bench by Fletcher's desk was empty. Conway's father had got tired of waiting, but Leopold was unconcerned. There was nothing more he could tell the man. He led Rona into his office and seated her opposite the desk. Fletcher came in, and the police stenographer, and they listened to her account of the cocaine traffic along LaGrange Street.

The story was not an unusual one. Except for the use of the ice cream truck to distribute the drug to the street's residents, it was one that Leopold and Fletcher had heard countless times before. The four college youths, using pot themselves, had drifted gradually into selling it to others on campus, finally graduating to LaGrange Street and the hard stuff. Pete Gabriel had been waiting for them, like some angel of destruction, and he'd quickly become their supplier.

Leopold listened to the story, and tried to fit it into the thing that had happened two days ago, tried to imagine in his own mind the hours of hot afternoon discomfort in the second-floor apartment: Mark Conway with the gun, stepping out of the bathroom to open fire on the others; or someone else, coming up the fire escape; Pete Gabriel, closing out his operation.

Later, after the girl had left, he sat with Fletcher and tried to puzzle it out. "I think we're missing something important here, an ele-

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ment we haven't yet considered."

"Like what, Captain?"

"Remember that newspaper photo she showed us yesterday?"

"Sure. The one with Gabriel in front of the apartment."

Leopold nodded. "In that picture he was watching our man Vincent."

"So?"

"So I don't know. But find out what case Vincent was on. He said he was next door when the shooting started. Find out why."

"You think Vincent's involved?"

"He said he didn't know Gabriel, but Gabriel seemed to know him, judging by that photo. He said he was in the next house, and Gabriel lives in the next house. See what you can find out. Meanwhile, I'll stop at the hospital and see how Joshings is coming along. If he regains consciousness, maybe we can relax."

It was early evening when Leopold parked in the lot adjoining Memorial Hospital and hurried up the broad stone steps to the main entrance. Many of the patients were just finishing their evening meal, and no one noticed him as he hurried along the hall to the intensive-care unit.

A doctor he knew met him at the doorway. "We were just trying to reach you, Captain. It's the Joshings youth."

"He's conscious?"

The doctor shook his head. "I'm afraid he's dead."

"Dead?"

"We don't know what happened. There's a possibility some unauthorized person entered the room and gave him an injection."

"Do you realize what you're saying, Doctor?"

"I do. Someone may have murdered him."

By the time Leopold met Fletcher an hour later in the hospital lobby, he was in a state of profound depression. Nothing had gone right with the case from the beginning, and Joshings' death seemed the final indignity.

"How did it happen, Captain?"

Leopold sank into an overstuffed lobby chair. "The duty nurse saw someone in a white coat by his bed. She didn't even check to see who it was. She thought it was a doctor giving an injection, and thought nothing more of it. When she checked Joshings fifteen minutes later, he was dead."

"Poison?"

"A fatal overdose of heroin."

"It's that easy to kill someone in a hospital?"

"Apparently, if you're wearing a white coat and looking official. I should have had a guard on him, but I saw no reason for it. He wasn't going anywhere, and we had

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no way of knowing his life was still in danger."

"Could the nurse give any sort of description?"

"Only that it was a man."

"What does it mean, Captain? That the killer of those other boys is still at large?"

"The only possible motive for killing Joshings was to keep him from talking."

"About the murders or the drug business?"

Leopold frowned. "What do you mean, Fletcher?"

"I've been checking on Harry Vincent. I think you're right about him, Captain. I think he was at Gabriel's apartment just before the shooting next door. He was on a narcotics case, and he'd asked the records clerk for the file on Gabriel just that morning."

Leopold's lips tightened. "Let's go see him."

On the way to the car, Fletcher said, "I hope you're not blaming yourself for the death of Joshings."

"I'm blaming myself until I find someone better to blame," Leopold sighed. "You'd better have someone contact his family."

"They always have families, don't they?"

Leopold paused by the car door. "You know, that girl told me I could understand things better if I had children of my own. Maybe she was right," he said thoughtfully.

They found Harry Vincent trimming the bushes in front of his modest middle-class home. It was a detective's house, with a spotlight to protect against nighttime prowlers, and a big German shepherd tied to a tree. The dog began barking as Leopold approached across the lawn, and Vincent turned from his job.

"Getting a bit dark for yard work," Leopold observed, glancing at the twilight sky.

"I don't have any other time to do it, Captain. I've been working long hours this week."

"I wanted to ask you about your hours, Vincent."

"Oh?"

"You said you were on a case the other afternoon, when the shooting happened, but Fletcher and I were going off duty at the time. You should have been, too. It was more than routine if it kept you working late."

"I told you I was getting ready to report in."

"You also told me you were checking stolen loot, but that morning you asked for the file on Pete Gabriel."

"So what?" He was growing edgy.

"When Fletcher asked about the picture in the paper, you denied knowing Gabriel."

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"I—" He seemed disoriented.

"You were in Gabriel's apartment when the shooting started, weren't you?"

"Not exactly," Vincent admitted, very softly. "I suppose I'd better tell you about it. I should have told you in the beginning. I was after stolen goods, just like I said, and I heard the stuff was being fenced through Gabriel in return for drugs. I went there to question him, and I caught one of the college kids, Mark Conway, picking up a supply of cocaine. When Conway saw me, he tried to run and the stuff spilled out of an ice cream container he was carrying. He was just wearing a pair of shorts, and he had no place to hide it."

"And you didn't arrest him?"

"Sure I did! But then I made one hell of a mistake. He asked to go up to his apartment to put on some more clothes. That seemed reasonable enough. I gave him two minutes and waited outside the door."

"You didn't go in with him?" Leopold asked, incredulous.

"Hell, Captain, he reminded me of my own son. I knew he wouldn't run away."

"Then what happened?"

"I heard the shots. I couldn't believe my ears. I was into that apartment with my gun out, but it was already too late. Two of them were dead and Joshings was badly wounded." Vincent rubbed his eyes.

"And Conway?"

"I was in the livingroom when I heard the last shot from the shower."

"Then you knew all along that Conway killed them and took his own life."

The detective nodded. "I thought everyone would know. I didn't see any point in ruining my career because I trusted a kid for two minutes. So I kept quiet about Gabriel and the drug arrest. I knew Gabriel wouldn't talk and implicate himself."

"But without the motive, without knowledge of the impending arrest, we had no sure way of knowing Conway killed himself."

Vincent snorted. "What sort of motive is that? Who'd be crazy enough to kill his roommates and himself just because he'd been arrested on a drug charge?"

"Mark Conway," Leopold said quietly. "He was crazy enough."

The father was alone in his hotel room, staring out at the lights of the city, when Leopold arrived. He didn't seem surprised at the visit.

"Someone killed Joshings at the hospital today," Leopold said.

Frederick Conway lifted his eyes from the window. "Yes."

"You killed him, didn't you?"

"Yes."

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"Did you expect to get away with it?"

"I don't know. I was only thinking of my son."

"You knew he killed those boys?"

"Yes, I knew. God help me, I knew."

Leopold sat down and studied the man, watching the face profiled against the window. "I don't believe you were thinking of Mark at all, Mr. Conway. You were thinking of yourself."

"It's the same, isn't it? Do you know what it's like to raise a boy for twenty-one years and then discover he's mentally unbalanced and a killer?"

"When did you discover that?" Leopold asked quietly.

"There were lots of things. The worst was last year, when I caught him with a stolen car. He was in the garage, late at night. I threatened to have him arrested, and he went into some sort of blind panic. He ran from me, and when I found him he'd cut his wrists with a garden shears. I got him to the hospital somehow, and hushed the whole thing up. Then there was the gun. I found it in his suitcase last Christmas and asked him about it. He said he'd bought it to kill himself if he ever proved unworthy of me."

"If that's true, your son needed psychiatric help."

"Locked away in an asylum?"

"I'm no doctor, Mr. Conway. But Mark killed two others before he took his own life. You could have prevented that."

"Do you know how it happened?"

Leopold nodded. "I think so. A detective arrested your son on a narcotics charge. The man foolishly allowed Mark to enter his apartment alone to get some clothes. We'll never know just what happened next, but I think the boys were trying to stop Mark from killing himself. In his moment of madness he shot them before taking his own life."

Frederick Conway turned toward the window once more, alone with his thoughts. Finally he said, "The honor of the family was always important to Mark. I instilled that into him." And then, "How did you know I killed the Joshings boy?"

"Obviously he was killed to keep him from telling what happened. By the real murderer? Maybe, but I was already pretty certain Mark was the murderer. The others all had three or four bullets in them. Conway had only one, even though another bullet remained in the weapon. And there wasn't really time for an elaborate faked suicide in the shower. When I talked to Detective Vincent earlier this evening, he filled in some other facts

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that confirmed your son's guilt. But if Mark was the killer, then who murdered Joshings at the hospital? The police already knew about the drug traffic, so Gabriel had nothing to gain, but *you* knew the case would probably remain unsolved without Joshings' testimony. Your son's name—your family name—would remain untarnished. You could always insist someone else had killed those boys, even if in your heart you knew better."

"You're a wise man, Captain."

"Not so wise. You were waiting to see me this afternoon, and the visitors' bench is right by Lieutenant Fletcher's desk. You heard him tell me over the phone that Joshings was coming around and might make a statement. You were gone when I got back to headquarters, on your way to the hospital to finish what your son started."

Conway bowed his head. "I didn't do enough for him while he lived. I felt this was making it up to him a bit."

"Murder? Sneaking into that hospital room in a doctor's coat and injecting an overdose of heroin into that boy? I suppose the heroin came from Mark, too."

"I found it in his things at home."

"And so you murdered for him. To keep his name clean."

"Don't you understand, Captain? Haven't you any sons of your own?"

That was the second time someone had asked him the question. He thought of the girl, Rona, and of Harry Vincent, who let Mark out of his sight because the boy reminded him of his son. "No," Leopold answered softly. "I don't have any sons. If I did, it wouldn't be like you and Mark."

Frederick Conway got slowly to his feet. "Give me a break, Captain. Leave me alone here for a minute."

"No."

Conway drew a breath, turned, and threw himself at the window. Leopold grabbed him by the belt and yanked him to the floor. He wasn't about to lose this one, like Vincent had lost Mark. He had a way of learning from other people's mistakes.

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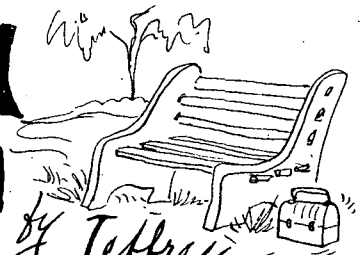
Sometimes one simply does not get the message.

RANSOM DEMAND



by Jeffrey M. Wallmann

FRANCES BARTLETT sat in her husband's easy chair, her big hands clasped loosely in her lap, a plumpish auburn-haired woman in her late thirties, wearing a quilted robe over her pink nightgown. She was watching the *Today* show on television after having packed the children off to school, but this particular morning she wasn't relaxing as she usually did.

She was worried. She wanted to know what had happened to Paul.

Her husband was supposed to have been home sometime after two this morning, after his flight from Chicago landed. Frances had awakened at three-thirty a.m. from the instinct bred of ten years of marriage to a sales manager, and had tossed and fretted in the dark for an hour before calling the airline. A clerk told her the plane had arrived on time, but she'd have to wait until the business office opened to learn if her husband's name was on the passenger manifest or if he had transferred flights. Sorry . . .

Touched slightly by hysteria, Frances had phoned long-distance to the hotel at which Paul had been staying; he had checked out the previous evening without leaving any messages. Sorry . . .

She hadn't been able to sleep the rest of the night.

At least there hadn't been a crash, she told herself as she sat watching the television. She'd have heard about it if there had been, and surely she'd have been notified

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if there'd been an accident or Paul had gotten sick and was in a hospital. It was probably nothing, a mix-up of some kind—but it wasn't like Paul not to let her know. Where was he? Oh, God, where was Paul?

She glanced at her wristwatch. Another hour and she'd phone the airline's business office, and if they couldn't help her, she'd wait for the next flight from Chicago. If he weren't on that, she'd . . . Frances shivered, not wanting to think about what she would have to do then. The police, Paul's boss, the publicity, questions and embarrassment; the prospect seemed too dreadful for words.

A commercial began, and she went into the kitchen for another cup of coffee. She was stirring it absently when the phone rang. She set the cup down and hurriedly picked up the receiver on the extension phone near her. "H-Hello?"

"Mrs. Bartlett? Mrs. Paul Bartlett?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"We have your husband, Mrs. Bartlett."

"What?" she said blankly. "What?"

"We have your husband," the voice repeated.

"What? You have Paul? How?"

"This is a ransom demand. Now do you understand?"

"Oh, my God . . . !" Frances sucked in her breath, trying to steady herself with her free hand. She knocked over the cup, coffee spilling across the counter; she never noticed it. "Paul, is he all right?"

"He's fine. He'll stay that way only if you do what I tell you."

"Let me speak to him. Please, let me just—"

"No. Listen to me, Mrs. Bartlett, and listen closely." The man's voice was low and flat. "We want ten thousand dollars in unmarked bills, nothing over a twenty. Is that clear?"

"Yes, but I don't have—"

"Hock your jewels if you have to, but get ten thousand together by noon if you want to see your husband alive again. Take the money in a lunch pail to McKinley Park. You know where that is?"

"Downtown," she answered quickly. "It's downtown."

"Right. There's a statue of McKinley in the middle of it. At exactly twelve-fifteen, walk along the north path and put the pail beside the third bench from the statue. Got that? Third bench, north side."

"I-I'm afraid I don't know which is—"

"The north side faces Woolworth's. Then keep on going and don't look back."

"I won't. Twelve-fifteen, third bench, facing Woolworth's," she re-

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cited numbly. "When do I . . . see Paul?"

"Tomorrow night."

"That long? Can't you—"

"Don't call the police, Mrs. Bartlett. We'll be watching you, and if you try to double-cross us, you'll never get another chance."

"I understand. But can't you let him go sooner? Please, can't you?" Then she realized that she was talking into a dead receiver; the man had hung up. She stood holding the phone for another moment, still stunned, and then slowly replaced it with mechanical deliberation.

"No," she cried out to her still, empty house. *"No!"*

Frances had been unable to sit still since she'd returned from McKinley Park. Now, with school over and her children playing in the yard, she paced aimlessly through the house, the phone serving as the base of her wanderings. She would walk to the livingroom window and move the drapes aside to peer out; let them drop to pace through the hall and up the stairs, gazing abstractedly into her bedroom, hers and Paul's; down the stairs to smoke a cigarette and drink a cup of coffee, only to leave them half-finished; return once more to stare at the phone, occasionally touching its bright plastic.

She knew she would carry this day alive and painfully fresh in her mind for a long time. She wouldn't forget her initial panic, when she'd almost called the police, followed by her longer, cold dread of the chance she'd be taking if she did. She wouldn't forget how frantic she'd been at the bank, closing out the accounts and cashing most of their bonds, or how acutely she'd had to control herself when she'd left the pail and simply kept on walking. Or now, despairing, hoping she'd done right and praying Paul would be released unharmed. She kept asking herself *why?* They weren't rich or famous, only an average, middle-class family like millions of others. Why had *they* been picked?

The phone rang again. She ran to it, clutching it. "Hello? Hello?"

"Honey?"

"Paul!" Tears of relief welled, blurring her vision. "Oh, Paul, are you all right?"

"A little tired, but otherwise I'm OK. What's the matter?"

"Where are you?"

"Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia?"

"Sure. The meeting just broke up—it lasted longer than I thought."

"Meeting?" Frances felt dazed and bewildered. "Paul, I-I don't understand. What meeting?"

"This new accounts thing that

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came up at the last minute. I tried calling you last night to tell you I had to go, but the line was busy. Didn't you get my wire?"

"No, I didn't. You mean you're all right?"

"I told you, I'm OK. Just what's going on, anyway?"

"You mean you . . . you weren't kidnapped?"

"Kidnapped!" Her husband laughed. "What makes you think I was kidnapped?"

Frances thought about the phone call and the ransom demand—then she thought about the ten thousand dollars, and fainted.

Lew Sieberts lounged in his swivel chair, tapping his thick fingers on the battered oak desk, impatient for his shift to be over. He was still amazed at how smoothly the job had gone, and every once in a while he'd have to look in the third drawer of his desk just to be sure the pailful of money he'd picked up on his lunch hour wasn't a figment of his imagination. Man, if he had to get fired, this was the kind of severance pay to leave with; the job was proving to be the best he'd ever had, even if it was the shortest. He'd stick around to pocket his regular severance tomorrow morning, but then he was getting out of town before that Bartlett guy returned. To New York City, maybe—it had the action, and he could get so lost there he'd never be caught. Yeah, New York sounded real good to him . . .

The teletype across the room began to chatter. When its bell rang, Sieberts went over to it and tore off the flimsy. It read:

BLTMR XLT1960 JS DL PD KANSAS CITY MO 6/21 340P XXX CAROLE WILSON 424 MAXWELL CT BALTIMORE MD 467 9073 XXXX MUST GO TO SPRINGFIELD FOR TWO DAYS STOP UNEXPECTED BUSINESS SORRY STOP DONT WORRY LOVE PETER STOP END XXXX

Sieberts sat down again, studying the message. It was very similar to the wire Bartlett had sent yesterday. He leaned back until he could see out of the dusty window of the telegraph office and smiled faintly, wondering if he could pull the same trick twice in a row. Well, twenty grand was twice as much as he had now . . .

He swiveled around and picked up the phone, dialing the number printed on the telegram. The line buzzed and a woman's voice answered.

"Mrs. Wilson? Mrs. Peter Wilson?" he said to her. "We have your husband . . ."

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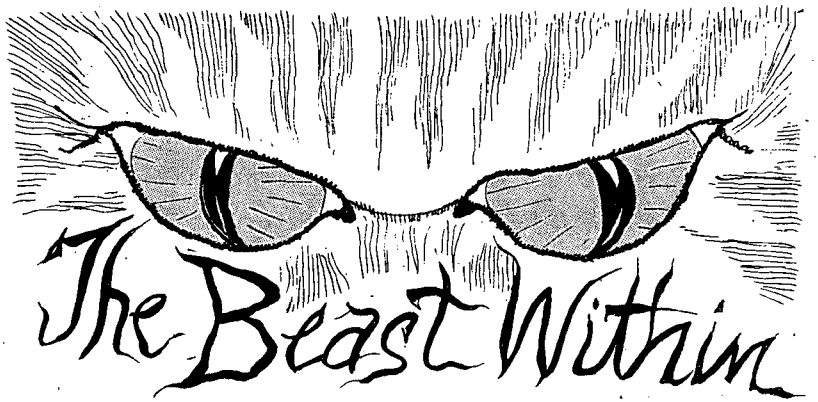
A cat's-eye view of oneself can open up a whole new cycle.



The Beast Within

EARLY SUMMER twilight had begun to soften the harsh outlines of the city when Tessa pushed open the sliding glass doors and stepped out onto the terrace. Dusk blurred away the grime and ugliness of surrounding buildings and even brought a kind of eerie beauty to the skeletal girders of the new skyscraper going up next door.

Gray-haired, middle-aged and now drained of all emotion, Tessa leaned heavily-fleshed arms on the railing of the penthouse terrace and let the night enfold her.

From the street far below, the muffled sounds of evening traffic floated up to her, and for a moment she considered jumping—to end it all in one brief instant of broken flesh and screaming ambulances while the curious stared. What real difference would it make to her, to anyone, if she lived another day or year, or twenty years?

Still, the habit of life was too deeply in her. With a few cruel and indifferent words, Clarence had destroyed her world; but he had not destroyed her will to live. Not yet.

She glanced across the narrow space to the uncompleted building. The workmen who filled the daylight hours with a cacophony of rivets and protesting winches were gone now, leaving behind, for

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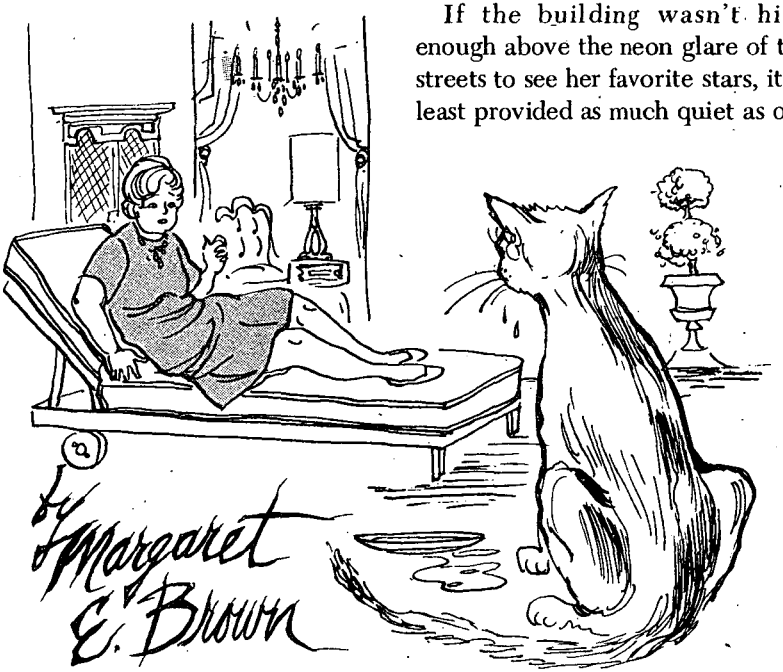
safety, hundreds of tiny bare light bulbs. In the warm breeze, they swung on their wires like chained fireflies in the dusk.

Tessa smiled at the thought. How long had it been since she had seen real fireflies drift through summer twilight? Surely not more than half a dozen times since marrying Clarence. She no longer hated the city, but she had never forgiven it for not having fireflies—or for blocking out the Milky Way with its star-quenching skyscrapers.

Even thirty years ago, when he had married her and brought her away from the country, Clarence had not understood her unease at living in a place so eternally and brilliantly lit. When his friends complimented them on the penthouse and marveled at the size of their terrace (enormous even by those booming wartime standards of the Forties), he would laugh and say, "I bought it for Tessa. Can't fence in a country girl, you know; they need 'land, lots of land 'neath the starry skies above!' "

It hadn't taken her long to realize that the penthouse was more a gift to his vanity than to still her unspoken needs. After a while, she stopped caring.

If the building wasn't high enough above the neon glare of the streets to see her favorite stars, it at least provided as much quiet as one



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could expect in a city. She could always lie back on one of the cushioned chaises and remember how the Milky Way swirled in and out of the constellations; remember the dainty charm of the Pleiades tucked away in Taurus the Bull.

But not tonight. Instead of star-studded skies, memory forced her to relive the past hour.

She was long since reconciled to the fact that Clarence did not love her; but after years of trying to fit his standards, she had thought that he was comfortable with her and that she was necessary to him in all the other spheres which hold a marriage together after passion is gone.

Tonight, Clarence had made it brutally clear that not only was she unnecessary, but that the woman she had become, to please him, was the antithesis of the woman he'd chosen to replace her.

In a daze, Tessa had followed him through their apartment as he packed his suitcases. Mechanically, she had handed him clean shirts and underwear; and, seeing what a mess he was making of his perfectly tailored suits, she had taken over the actual packing as she always did when he had to go away on business trips. Only this time, he was going to a hotel and would not be back.

"But why?" she asked, smoothing a crease in his gray slacks.

They had met Lynn Herrick at one of Alison's parties. Aggressive and uninhibited, she wore the latest mod clothes and let her straight black hair swing longer than a teenager's although she was probably past thirty. Tessa thought her brittle and obvious, hardly Clarence's type, and she had been amused by the girl's blatantly flirtatious approach.

"Why?" she demanded again and was amazed at the fatuous expression which spread across Clarence's face: a blend of pride, sheepishness and defiance.

"Because she's going to bear my child," he said pompously, striking a pose of chivalrous manhood.

It was the ultimate blow. For years Tessa had pleaded for a child, only to have Clarence take every precaution to prevent one.

"You always loathed children. You said they were encumbrances—whining, slobbering nuisances!"

"It wasn't my fault," Clarence protested. "Accidents happen."

"I'll bet!" Tessa muttered crudely, knowing that nothing accidental ever happens to the Lynn Herricks of this world; but Clarence chose to ignore her remark.

"Now that it has happened, Lynn has made me see how much I owe it to myself and to the company. 'A pledge to posterity' she calls it, since it doesn't look as if Richard and Alison are going to produce an

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heir, as you know," Clarence said.

Richard Loughlin was Clarence's much younger brother. Together, they had inherited control of a prosperous chain of department stores. Although Tessa had heard Richard remark wistfully that a child might be fun, his wife Alison shared Clarence's previous attitude toward offspring; and her distaste was strengthened by the fear of what a child might do to her size-eight figure.

With Clarence reveling in the new-found joys of prospective fatherhood, Tessa had straightened from his packing and snapped shut the final suitcase. Still in a daze, she stared at her reflection in the mirror over his dresser and was appalled.

In her conscious mind, she had known that she would soon be fifty, that her hair was gray, her figure no longer slim; and she had known that Clarence would never let her have children—but deep inside, she felt the young, half-wild girl she had been cry out in protest at this ultimate denial, at this old and barren woman she had become.

The siren of a fire engine on the street below drew Tessa to the edge of the terrace again. Night had fallen completely and traffic was thin now. The sidewalks were nearly deserted.

She still felt outraged at being cast aside so summarily—as if a pat on the shoulder, the promise of lavish alimony, and an "I told Lynn you'd be sensible about everything" were enough to compensate for thirty years of her life—but at least her brief urge toward self-destruction had dissipated.

She stared again at the bobbing safety lights of the uncompleted building and remembered that the last time she had seen fireflies had been four years ago, after Richard and Alison returned from their honeymoon. She and Clarence had gone down to Pennsylvania with them to help warm the old farm Richard had just bought as a wedding surprise for Alison.

The hundred and thirty acres of overgrown fields and virgin woodlands had indeed been a surprise to Alison. Her idea of a suitable weekend retreat was a modern beach house on Martha's Vineyard.

Tessa had loved it and had tramped the woods with Richard, windblown and exhilarated, while Alison and Clarence complained about the bugs and dredged up pressing reasons for cutting short their stay. Although Alison had been charming, and had assured Richard that she was delighted with the farm, she found excellent excuses for not accompanying him on his infrequent trips to the country.

Remembering the farm's isolation, Tessa wondered if Richard

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would mind if she buried herself there for a while. Perhaps in the country she could sort things out and grope her way back to the wild freedom she had known thirty years ago, before Clarence took her away and "housebroke her"—as he'd expressed it in the early years of their marriage.

A cat's terrified yowl caught her attention. She looked up and saw it running along one of the steel girders which stuck out several feet from a higher level of the new building. The cat raced out on it as if pursued by the three-headed hound of Hell, and its momentum was too great to stop when it realized the danger.

It soared off the end of the girder and landed with a sickening thump on the terrace awning. Awkwardly writhing off the awning, the cat leaped to the terrace floor and cowered under one of the chaises, quivering with panic.

Tessa watched the end of the girder, expecting to see a battle-scarred tomcat spoiling for a fight. Although cats seldom came up this high, it was not unusual to see one taking a shortcut across her terrace from one rooftop to another, up and down fire escapes. But no other cat appeared.

The night air had roused that touch of arthritis which had begun to bother Tessa lately, and it was an effort to bend down beside the lounge chair. She tried to coax the cat out, but it shrank away from her hand. "Here, kitty," she murmured, "it's all right. There's no one chasing you now."

She had always liked cats and, for that reason, refused to own one, knowing how easy it would be to let a small animal become a proxy child. She sensed Richard's antipathy and sympathized with him whenever Alison referred to Liebchen, their dachshund, as "Baby."

Patiently, she waited for the cat to stop trembling and sniff her outstretched hand. She kept her tone low and soothing, but it would not abandon its shelter. Careful to make no sudden moves, Tessa stood up and stepped back a few feet.

The cat edged out then, suspiciously poised for flight, and the light from the livingroom beyond the glass doors fell across it. It was a young female with crisp black and gray markings and white paws; and judging by its leggy thinness, it hadn't eaten in some time.

"Poor thing," Tessa said, moved by its uneasy trust. "Wait right there, kitty—I'll get you something to eat." As if it understood she meant no harm, the cat did not skitter aside when she moved past it into the apartment.

In a few minutes, Tessa returned, carrying a saucer of warm milk and

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a generous chunk of rare beef which she'd recklessly cut from the heart of their untouched dinner roast. "You might as well have it, kitty. No one else will be eating it."

Stiff-legged and wary, the young cat approached the food and sniffed; then, clumsily, it tore at the meat, almost choking in its haste.

"Slow down!" Tessa warned, and knelt beside the cat to pull the meat into smaller pieces. "You're an odd one. Didn't you ever eat meat before?" She tried to stroke its thin back, but the cat quivered and slipped away beneath her plump hand. "Sorry, cat. I was just being friendly."

She sat down heavily on one of the chaises and watched the animal finish its meal. When the meat was gone, it turned to the saucer of milk and drank messily with much sneezing and shaking of its small head as it inadvertently got milk in its nose.

Tessa was amused and a bit puzzled. She'd never seen a cat so graceless and awkward. It was almost like a young, untutored kitten; and when it finished eating and sat staring at her, Tessa couldn't help laughing aloud. "Didn't your mother teach you *any*thing, silly? You're supposed to wash your paws and whiskers now."

The cat moved from the patch of light where it had sat silhouetted, its face in darkness. With purposeful caution, it circled the chaise until Tessa was between the cat and the terrace doors. Light from the livingroom fell full in its eyes there and was caught and reflected with an eerie intensity.

Uneasily, Tessa shivered as the cat's eyes met her own with unwavering steadiness. "Now I understand why cats are always linked with the supernatu—"

The cat's eyes seemed to bore into her brain. There was a spiraling vortex of blinding light. Her mind was assaulted—mauled and dragged down and under and through it, existence without shape. She was held by a roaring numbness which lasted forever and was over instantly, and she was conscious of another's existence, mingling and passing—a being who was terrified, panic-stricken and yet fiercely exultant.

There was a brief, weird sensation of being unbearably compacted and compressed; the universe seemed to tilt and swirl; then it was over. The light faded to normal city darkness, the roaring ceased and she knew that she was sprawled upon the cool flagstones of the terrace.

She tried to push herself up, but her body would not respond normally. Dazed, she looked around and screamed at the madness of a world suddenly magnified in size—a

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scream which choked off as she caught sight of someone enormous sitting on the now-huge chaise.

A plump, middle-aged woman held her face between trembling hands and moaned, "Thank God! Thank God!"

With a shock, Tessa realized she was seeing her own face for the first time, without the reversing effect of a mirror. The shock intensified as she looked down through slitted eyes and saw neat white paws instead of her own hands. With alien instinct, she felt the ridge of her spine quiver as fur stood on end. She tried to speak and was horrified to hear a feline yowl emerge.

The woman on the chaise—Tessa could no longer think of that body as herself—stopped moaning then and watched her warily. "You're not mad, if that's what you're wondering. Not yet, anyhow. Though you'll go mad if you don't get out of that skin in time."

Snatching up one of the cushions, she flung it at Tessa. "Shoo! G'wan, scat!" she gibbered. "You can't make me look in your eyes. I'll never get caught again. Scat, damn you!"

Startled, Tessa sprang to the railing of the terrace and teetered there awkwardly. The body responded now, but she didn't know how well she could control it, and twenty-eight stories above street level was too high to allow for much error.

The woman who had stolen her body seemed afraid to come closer. "You might as well go!" she snarled at Tessa. She threw a calculating glance at the luxurious interior beyond the glass doors. In the lamp lights, the rooms looked comfortable and secure. "It's a lousy body—too old and too fat—but it seems to be a rich one and it's human and I'm keeping it, so *scat*!"

Her new reflexes were quicker than those of her old body; and before the slipper left the woman's hand, Tessa had dropped to the narrow ledge circling the outside of her apartment. Residual instinct made her footing firm as she followed the ledge around the corner of the building to the fire escape, where it was an easy climb to the roof. There, in comparative safety from flying shoes and incipient plunges to the street, Tessa drew up to consider the situation.

Cat's body or not, she thought wryly, *it's still my mind.* She explored the sensations of her new body, absentmindedly licking away the dried milk which stuck to her whiskers, and discovered that vestigial traces of former identities clung to the brain. Mere wisps they were, like perfume hanging in a closed room, but enough to piece together a picture of what had hap-

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pened to her on the terrace below.

The one who had just stolen her body had been young and sly, but not overly bright. Judging from the terror and panic so freshly imprinted, she had fled through the city and had taken the first body she could.

Behind those raw emotions lay a cooler, more calculating undertone and Tessa knew *that* one had been more mature, had chosen the girl's body deliberately and after much thought. Not for her the hasty grabbing of the first opportunity; instead, she had stalked her prey with care, taking a body that was pretty, healthy, and, above all, young.

Beyond those two, Tessa could not sort out the other personalities whose lingering traces she felt. Nor could she know who had been the first, or how it all had started. Probing too deeply, she recoiled from the touch of a totally alien animal essence struggling for consciousness—the underlying basic *catness* of this creature whose body she now inhabited.

Tessa clamped down ruthlessly on these primeval stirrings, forcing them back under. This must be what the girl meant about going mad. How long could a person stay in control?

The answer, of course, was to get back into a human body. Tessa pattered softly to the edge of the roof and peered down at the terrace. Below, the girl in her body still cowered on the chaise longue as if unable to walk into the apartment and assume possession. She sat slumped and looked old and defeated.

She was right, thought Tessa, *it is a lousy body. She's welcome to the joys of being Mrs. Clarence Loughlin.*

Her spirits soaring, Tessa danced across the black-tarred roof on nimble paws. Joyfully, she experimented with her new body and essayed small leaps into the night air. No more arthritis, no excess flab to make her gasp for breath. What bliss to think a motion and have lithe muscles respond!

Drunk with her new physical prowess, she raced to the fire escape, leaped to the railing and recklessly threw herself out into space. There was one sickening moment when she felt she must have misjudged, then she caught herself on a jutting scaffold and scrambled onto it.

Memories it had taken thirty years to bury were uncovered as Tessa prowled through the night and rediscovered things forgotten in the air-conditioned, temperature-controlled, insulated environment which had been her life with Clarence.

Freed of her old woman's body,

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she felt a oneness again with—what? The world? Nature? God? The name didn't matter, only the feeling. Even here in the city, in the heart of man's farthest retreat into artifice, she felt it.

What it must be like to have a cat's body in the country! Tessa thought, and then shivered as she realized that it would be too much. To be in this body with grass and dirt underneath, surrounded by trees and bushes alive with small rustlings, an uncluttered sky overhead—a human mind would go mad with so much sensory stimulation.

No, better the city with its concrete and cars and crush of people to remind her that she was human, that this body was only temporary.

Still, she thought, descending gracefully from the new building, *there can be no harm in just a taste.*

She ran west along half-deserted streets, heading for the park.

On the cross-town streets, traffic was light; but crossing the avenues terrified her. The rumble and throb of all those engines, the glaring lights and impatient horns kept her fur on end. She had to force herself to step off the curb at Fifth Avenue; and as she darted across its wide expanse, she half-expected to be crushed beneath a taxi.

The park was a haven now. Gratefully, she dived between its fence railings and melted into the dark safety of its jumble of bushes.

In the next few hours, Tessa shed all the discipline of thirty years with Clarence, her years of thinking "What will Clarence say?" when she gave way to an impulsive act; the fear of being called "quaint" by his friends if she spoke her inmost thoughts.

If Pan were a god, she truly worshipped him that night! Abandoning herself to instinctual joys, she raced headlong down grassy hills; rolled paws over tail-tip in the moonlight; chased a sleepy, crotchety squirrel through the treetops; then skimmed down to the duck pond to lap daintily at the water and dabble at goldfish turned silver in the moonbeams.

As the moon slid below the tall buildings west of the park, she ate flesh of her own killing; and later—behind the Mad Hatter's bronze toadstool—she allowed the huge ginger male who had stalked her for an hour to approach her, to circle ever nearer . . .

What followed next had been out of her control as the alien animal consciousness below surged into dominance. Only when it was over and the ginger tom gone, was she able to reassert her will and force that embryonic consciousness back to submission.

Just before dawn, her neat feline

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head poked through the railing at Fifth and East 64th Street and hesitated as she surveyed the deserted avenue, emptied of all traffic save an occasional green and white bus.

Reassured, Tessa stepped out onto the sidewalk and sat on narrow haunches to smooth and groom her ruffled striped fur. She was shaken by the night's experiences, but complacently unrepentant. No matter what lay ahead, this night was now part of her past and worth any price she might yet have to pay.

Nevertheless, Tessa knew that the strength of this body's true owner was growing and that another night would be a dangerous risk. She had to find another body, and soon.

Whose?

Lynn Herrick flashed to mind. How wickedly poetic it would be to take her rival's body, bear Clarence's child, and stick Lynn with a body which quite probably, after last night, would soon be producing offspring of its own! But she knew too little about Miss Herrick to feel confident in that role.

No, she was limited to someone familiar; someone young and financially comfortable; someone unpleasantly deserving; and, above all, someone *close.* She must be within transferring distance before the city's morning rush hour forced her back into the park until dark—an unthinkable risk.

As Tessa formulated these conditions, the logical candidate came into focus. *Of course!* She grinned. *Keep it in the family.* Angling across Fifth Avenue, she trotted uptown toward the luxurious building which housed the younger Loughlins.

Her tail twitched jauntily as she scampered along the sidewalk and elation grew as she considered the potentials of Alison's body, which was almost twenty-five years younger than her old body had been.

It might be tricky at first, but she had met all of Alison's few near relatives; and as for the surface friends who filled the aimless rounds of her sister-in-law's social life, Tessa knew they could be dropped without causing a ripple of curiosity. Especially if her life became filled with babies. That should please Richard.

Dear Richard! Tessa was surprised at the warmth of her feelings for her brother-in-law. She had always labeled her emotions as frustrated maternalism, for Richard had been a mere child when she and Clarence married.

Since then, somewhere along the line, maternalism seemed to have transmuted into something stronger. Wistful might-have-beens

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were now exciting possibilities.

Behind the heavy bronze and glass doors of Richard's building, a sleepy doorman nodded on his feet. The sun was not yet high enough to lighten the doorway under its pink and gray striped awning, and the deep shadows camouflaged her gray fur.

Keeping a low silhouette, she crouched beside the brass doors. As the doorman pushed it open for an early-rising tenant, she darted inside and streaked across the lobby to hide behind a large marble ash stand beside the elevator.

The rest would be simple as the elevator was large, dimly lit and paneled in dark mahogany. She had but to conceal herself under one of the pink velvet benches which lined its sides and wait until it should stop at Alison's floor.

Her tail twitched with impatience. When the elevator finally descended, she poised ready to spring as the door slid back.

Bedlam broke loose in a welter of shrill barks, tangled leash and startled, angry exclamations. The dog was upon her, front and back, yipping and snapping before she knew what was happening.

Automatically, she spat and raked the dog's nose with her sharp claws, which set him into a frenzy of jumping and straining against the leash and sent his master sprawling.

Tessa only had time to recognize that it was Richard, taking Liebchen out for a pre-breakfast walk, before she felt herself being whacked by the elevator boy's newspaper.

All avenues of escape were closed to her and she was given no time to think, to gather her wits, before the street doors were flung open and she was harried out onto the sidewalk.

Angry and disgusted with herself and the dog, Tessa checked her headlong flight some yards down the sidewalk and glared back at the entrance of the building where Liebchen smugly waddled down the shallow steps and pulled Richard off in the opposite direction.

So the front is out, thought Tessa. *I wonder if their flank is so well-guarded?*

It pleased her to discover that those years of easy compliance with Clarence's wishes had not blunted her initiative. She could not be thwarted now by a Wiener schnitzel of a dog.

Halfway around the block, she located a driveway leading to the small courtyard which serviced the complex of apartment buildings. From the top of a rubbish barrel, she managed to spring to the first rung of a fire escape and scramble up.

As she climbed, the night's physi-

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cal exertion began to make itself felt. Paw over paw, up and up, while every muscle begged for rest and her mind became a foggy treadmill able to hold only the single thought: paw in front of paw.

It seemed to take hours. Up thirteen steps to the landing, right turn; up thirteen steps to the landing, left turn, with such regular monotony that her mind became stupid with the endless repetition of black metal steps.

At the top landing, a ten-rung steel ladder rose straight to the roof. Her body responded sluggishly to this final effort and she sank down upon the tarred rooftop in utter exhaustion. The sun was high in the sky now; and with the last dregs of energy, Tessa crept into the shade of an overhanging ledge and was instantly asleep.

When she awoke in the late afternoon, the last rays of sunlight were slanting across the city. Hunger and thirst she could ignore for the time, but what of the quickening excitement which twilight was bringing?

She crept to the roof's edge and peered down at the empty terrace overlooking the park. An ivied trellis offered easy descent and she crouched behind a potted shrub to look through the doors. On such a mild day, the glass doors of the apartment had been left open behind their fine-meshed screens.

Inside, beyond the elegant livingroom, Alison's housekeeper set the table in the connecting dining room. There was no sign of Alison or Richard—or of Liebchen. Cautiously, Tessa pattered along the terrace to the screened doors of their bedroom, but it too was empty.

As she waited, darkness fell completely. From deep within, she felt the impatient tail-flick of awareness. She felt it respond to a cat's guttural cry two rooftops away, felt it surfacing against her will, pulled by the promise of another night of dark paths and wild ecstasy.

Desperately, she struggled with that other ego, fought it blindly and knew that soon her strength would not be enough.

Suddenly the terrace was flooded with light as all the lamps inside the apartment were switched on. Startled, the other self retreated; and Tessa heard Alison's light voice tell the housekeeper, "Just leave dinner on the stove, Mitchum. You can clear away in the morning."

"Yes, Mrs. Loughlin, and I want you and Mr. Loughlin to know how sorry I was to hear about—"

"Thank you, Mitchum," came Richard's voice, cutting her off.

Tessa sat motionless in the shadows outside as Liebchen trotted across the room and scrambled onto

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a low chair, unmindful of a feline.

As Richard mixed drinks, Alison said, "The dreadful thing about all this is Tessa. Those delusions that she's really a young girl—that she'd never met Clarence—or either of us. Do you suppose she's clever enough to fake a mental breakdown?"

"Stop it, Alison! How can you have watched her wretchedness and think that she's pretending?"

"But, Richard—"

"What a shock it must have been to have Clarence ask for a divorce after all these years. Did you know about Clarence and Lynn?" His voice was harsh with emotion. "You introduced them. Did you encourage it?"

"Really, darling! You sound as if Tessa were the injured party." Alison's tone held scornful irony.

"Well, really, she is!" Richard cried. "If you could have seen her, Alison, when Clarence first married her—so fresh and open and full of laughter. I was just a child, but I remember. I'd never met an adult like her. I thought she was like an April breeze blowing through this family; but everyone else was appalled that Clarence had married someone so unsuitable. I remember her face when Clarence lectured her for laughing too loudly."

Richard gazed bleakly into his glass. "After Father died, it was years before I saw her again. I couldn't believe the change: all the laughter gone, her guarded words. Clarence did a thorough job of making her into a suitable wife. He killed her spirit and then complained that she was dull! No wonder she's retreated into her past, to a time before she knew him. You heard the psychiatrist. He said it often happens."

"Nevertheless," Alison said coolly, "you seem to forget that while Clarence may have killed her spirit, he's the one who is actually dead."

In the shadows outside the screen, Tessa quivered. So they had found Clarence's body! That poor thieving child! At the sight of Clarence lying on the bedroom floor with his head crushed in, she must have panicked again.

"I haven't forgotten," Richard said quietly, "and I haven't forgotten Lynn Herrick either. If what Clarence told me yesterday is true, she's in an awkward position. I suppose I should make some sort of arrangement for her out of Clarence's estate."

"Don't be naive, Richard," Alison laughed. "She merely let Clarence believe what he wanted. Lynn is far too clever to get caught without a wedding ring."

"Then Clarence's request for the divorce, his death, Tessa's insanity—all this was predicated on a lie? And

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you knew it? You *did*! I can see it in your face!"

"You're being unfair," Alison said. "I didn't encourage his affair with Lynn. I introduced them, yes; but if it hadn't been Lynn, it would have been someone else. Clarence wanted a change and he always took what he wanted."

As she spoke, Alison moved between the kitchen and livingroom, arranging their dinner on a low table in front of the couch. Liebchen put interested paws on the edge of the table, but Richard shoved him aside roughly.

"There's no need to take it out on Liebchen," she said angrily. "Come along, baby, I have something nice for you in the kitchen."

On little short legs, the dachshund trotted after Alison and disappeared into the kitchen. Relieved, Tessa moved closer to the screen.

When Alison returned from the kitchen, her flash of anger had been replaced by a mask of solicitude. "Must you go out tonight, darling? Can't the lawyers wait until morning?"

She sat close to Richard on the couch and tried to interest him in food, but he pushed the plate away wearily.

"You know lawyers," he sighed. "Clarence's will can't be probated as written, so everything's complicated. There are papers to sign, technicalities to clear up."

"That's right," Alison said thoughtfully. "Murderers can't inherit from their victims, can they? Oh, Richard, don't pull away from me like that. I'm not being callous, darling. I feel just as badly about all this as you do, but we have to face the facts. Like it or not, Tessa did kill Clarence."

"Sorry," he said, standing up and reaching for his jacket. "I guess I just can't take it all in yet."

Alison remained on the couch with her back to him. As Richard took papers from his desk and put them in his briefcase, she said with careful casualness, "If they decide poor Tessa killed him in a fit of insanity and she later snaps out of it, would she then be able to inherit?"

"Probably not, legally," he said absently, his mind on sorting the papers. "Wouldn't matter though, since we'd give it back to her, of course."

"Oh, of course," Alison agreed brightly; but her eyes narrowed.

Richard leaned over the couch and kissed her cheek. "I don't know how long this will take. If you're tired, don't bother to wait up."

"Good night, darling. Try not to be too late." She smiled at him as he left the apartment; but when the door had latched behind him, her smile clicked off to be replaced by a

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grim look of serious calculation.

Lost in thought, she gazed blindly at the dark square of the screened doorway and was unaware when Tessa slowly eased up on narrow haunches to let the lamplight hit her eyes—eyes that glowed with abnormal intensity . . .

It was after midnight before Richard's key turned in the lock. Lying awake on their wide bed, she heard him drop his briefcase on the desk and open the bedroom door to whisper, "Alison?"

"I'm awake, darling," she said throatily and switched on a lamp. "Oh, Richard, you look so tired. Come to bed."

When at last he lay beside her in the darkness, she said shyly, "All evening I've been thinking about Tessa and Clarence—about their life together. I've been a rotten wife to you, Richard."

He made a sound of protest, but she placed slim young fingers against his lips. "No, darling, let me say it. I've been thinking how empty their marriage was and how ours would be the same if I didn't change. Richard, let's pretend we just met and that we know nothing about each other! Let's completely forget about everything that's happened before now and start anew. As soon as the funeral is over and we've settled Tessa in the best rest home we can find, let's go away together to the farm for a few weeks."

Incredulous, Richard propped himself on one elbow and peered into her face. "Do you really mean that?"

She nodded solemnly and he gathered her in his arms, but before he could kiss her properly, the night was broken by an angry hissing cry.

"What the devil is that?" Richard asked, sitting up in bed.

"Just a stray cat. It was on the terrace this evening and seemed hungry, so I gave it your dinner." With one shapely arm, she pulled Richard back down to her and then pitched her voice just loud enough to carry through the screen to the terrace. "If it's still there in the morning, I'll call the ASPCA and have them take it away."

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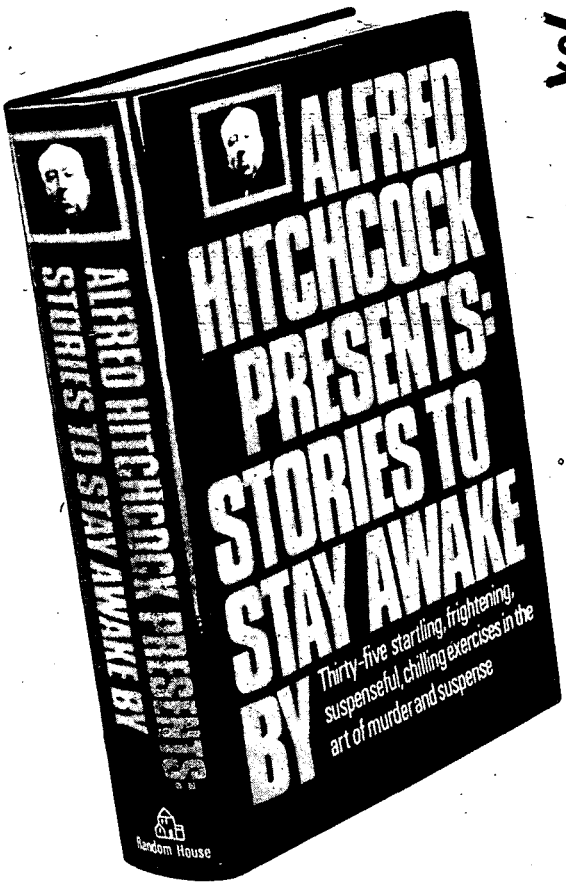
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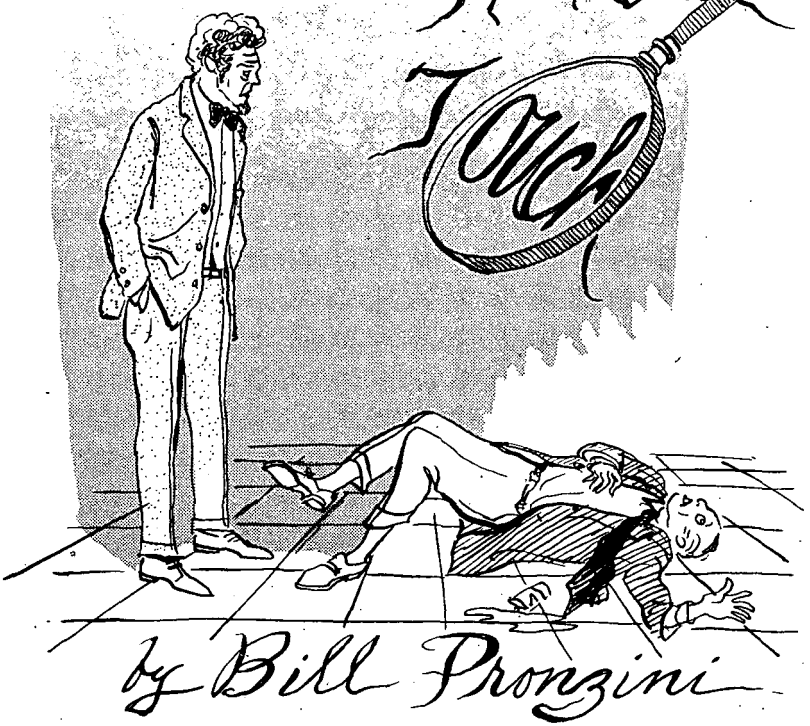
Some careers drone interminably through time. Others fall quickly to progress.

The Amateur Touch



PROFESSOR Nolan Aberdeen, an instructor in Logistics at Abbington College, had long been fascinated by the fictional cerebrations of the amateur sleuth—the brilliant deductive prowess of Sherlock Holmes and Philo Vance and all those gen-

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tlemen (and ladies) who had been created in their image. Ah, the thrill of matching wits with a clever murderer; the thrill of assimilating and extrapolating all the clues, the pieces of the puzzle, so that the guilt of the villain is irrefutably revealed; the thrill of seeing Justice done as a result of pure reasoning rather than brute force or blind accident. A task to be envied and coveted was that which befell the amateur investigator. Dedication, devotion, ratiocination—what more could anyone ask of his life?

A small, gray-haired, gray-goateed man addicted to dark gray suits and unpretentious bow ties, Professor Aberdeen had always fancied himself the possessor of both an unusually sharp eye for detail and, as a result of his training, deductive powers far exceeding those of the average human being. In spite of this, he had never—except vicariously, through extensive reading of mystery and crime puzzle books and stories—been involved in, much less solved, a crime of any magnitude whatsoever.

Not, that is, until this very moment.

Sadly, he looked down once again at the sprawled body of his lifelong friend, J. Baxter Sheldrake, a wealthy financier and philanthropist who had regularly endowed Abbington College with large sums of money among his other charitable donations. Moments earlier, Sheldrake, after draining half of a tall rum collins, had clutched at his throat and fallen unceremoniously to the terrace floor.

Aberdeen had, once his initial shock and horror passed, immediately deduced that J. Baxter had been poisoned. A circumspect sniff of the puddled liquid in the financier's shattered glass had revealed the telltale odor of bitter almonds, confirming his suspicion and clearly pinpointing the lethal toxin as arsenic.

There could be no doubt that J. Baxter had been murdered, that one of the other four people in Sheldrake's luxurious, thirtieth-floor penthouse—excluding Professor Aberdeen, of course—had somehow introduced the fatal dosage into his glass.

But—which one?

Tall, boyishly handsome Philip Sheldrake, the prodigal nephew, whose love for gambling, chorus girls, and fast sports cars had placed him in constant need of money far exceeding the allowance granted him by his uncle?

Titian-haired, sloe-eyed, pouting-mouthed Nora Sheldrake, Philip's half-sister, whose dream of a career on the stage had led her into shadowy liaisons with unscrupulous

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Broadway angels, and whose passion for fine clothing and appointments was known to be insatiable?

Sleek, unctuous, pencil-mustached Nicholas Driscoll, Nora's fiancé of two months, whose previous (elderly and wealthy) wife had died under mysterious circumstances?

Heavy-jowled, white-maned Arthur Vaughan, Sheldrake's lawyer, whom J. Baxter had begun to suspect, as he had recently confided in Aberdeen, of embezzling considerable amounts of the family fortune in order to finance wildcat stock market speculation?

Which one had killed J. Baxter Sheldrake?

And *how* had the murder been accomplished?

Professor Aberdeen recalled with complete clarity of detail the actions which had taken place immediately prior to J. Baxter's death. They had all been grouped around the stone-facaded terrace bar, drinking rum collins—a favorite beverage of Sheldrake's on warm summer evenings such as this one. Nora and her fiancé had been on J. Baxter's left, Arthur Vaughan on his right, and Philip had been seated on one of the leather-topped stools of the bar.

Aberdeen himself had been acting as bartender, a diversion which afforded him some pleasure, and he had fashioned each of the frosty drinks from the same bottle of Jamaican rum, the same bottle of imported collins mix; added maraschino cherries from the same container, slices of lime from the same citrus fruit. None of the ingredients had been poisoned beforehand, then, and the glasses had been in his full view on the barface at all times after each drink was mixed. No one had had the opportunity to slip granules of arsenic into J. Baxter's glass at that time, and no one—despite the close proximity of the group—could have dissolved the fatal poison in the collins once Sheldrake took the tumbler in his hand.

Professor Aberdeen thought with relish: *My first case! And a most intriguing and challenging problem it is, too.* He was not an insensitive man, and his shock at the death of his close friend was strong; but his love of cerebral pursuits was the one consuming motivation in his life and seemed always to rule his thoughts with an iron hand.

Aberdeen looked at each of the four individuals carefully, studying them in turn; he did not particularly care for any of them, but he told himself that he must not allow any personal feelings to interfere with his reasoning. Nicholas Driscoll stood near the low terrace wall smoking a cigarette with apparent indifference to the body of Shel-

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drake lying a few feet away. Nora Sheldrake stood near him, her hands clasped in front of her in a theatrical pose of despair, but there was clearly no sign of grief on her lovely features. Her half-brother, Philip, still sat at the bar, idly toying with a blue-and-white plastic straw from the canister of them resting at his elbow; he appeared bored by, and aloof from, his surroundings. The lawyer, Arthur Vaughan, was just hanging up the livingroom telephone—having elected himself to place the call to the authorities—and Professor Aberdeen detected a certain furtiveness in his movements.

One of them is a murderer, the professor thought, *and it's up to me to unmask him—or her—and to see that Justice is done. There's a tradition to be upheld here . . .*

Vaughan came out onto the terrace. "The police are on their way," he said nervously. "Shouldn't take them more than ten minutes from the local precinct."

"Ten minutes doesn't give me much time," Professor Aberdeen murmured half to himself.

"Much time for what?" Nora asked.

"Why—to solve the murder of Uncle Baxter, of course," Philip said with heavy irony. "The professor always did have a yen to be an amatuer sleuth, didn't you, Professor? Come, why not admit it?"

Aberdeen said nothing, his features grimly stoic.

Nora asked him, "Do you really suppose you can solve the mystery before the police arrive?"

"I believe I can."

"Monumental conceit," Vaughan muttered.

"There is no conceit in the confident application of pure deductive logic," Aberdeen said. He studied each of them for a moment longer, and then lowered his gaze to the sprawled body of Sheldrake a few feet in front of the stone-facaded bar. He looked at the dead man at length, peered at the shattered remains of the financier's glass, at the puddle of arsenic-laced rum collins, at the blue straw which had been in the drink. His acute mind was sorting and analyzing facts like a miniature and yet highly-developed computer.

Clues. Yes, there were clues . . . . and there were things seen, seemingly inconsequential things . . .

All at once, Professor Aberdeen had the answer.

Elation soared through him. He could not contain the taut smile which lifted the corners of his mouth, and his eyes glittered brightly. He backed off several steps, and then, in a clear and authoritative voice, announced dramatically, "I've just determined

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how J. Baxter was murdered. And I know now which one of you did it."

It was as if his words acted to freeze in time the miniature world of the penthouse terrace. Even the distant sounds of the great metropolis thirty stories below seemed to recede until the silence was absolute. Four pairs of eyes were fastened on the professor's face. No one moved. Aberdeen gloried in the moment, in the imminent revelation of what he had deduced through total recall and applied logic. He had witnessed such a moment vicariously on hundreds of occasions, but now, at long last, he was actually *living* it.

Vaughan coughed, and the sound seemed to break the spell which the professor's pronouncement had cast over the terrace. The others stirred. Nora said, "Well, don't keep us in suspense, Professor. Tell us who did it."

"By all means," Philip agreed. "Who murdered Uncle Baxter?"

"*You* did," Professor Aberdeen said. "You murdered your uncle."

All eyes were now on the boyishly handsome nephew. A faint smile flickered over Philip's mouth. "Did I, now?" he said. "Suppose you tell me how I did it?"

"With a straw," the Professor answered unhesitatingly.

"A what?"

"A straw," Aberdeen repeated. "A straw from that canister on the bar."

"J. Baxter was obviously poisoned," Vaughan interjected. "How could Philip have killed him with a *straw*?"

"Very simply, you see." Professor Aberdeen strode forward again, knelt, and grasped the blue straw which had been in Sheldrake's glass. He held it up. "As you can see, this straw is blue; it is entirely blue, from top to bottom. And yet, all the other straws in the bar canister are blue and white—blue on the top half, white on the bottom half."

"What does that prove?" Philip asked.

"It proves that you murdered your uncle," Professor Aberdeen said. "When I mixed each drink prior to J. Baxter's death, I set it on the bar and then took a straw from the canister and placed it in the glass. However, when I mixed J. Baxter's drink, it was *you* who removed a straw from the canister, *you* who placed that particular straw in his glass—a blue and white straw which is now entirely blue."

"You mean," Nora said, "the straw was poisoned?"

"Precisely," Professor Aberdeen told her, and he could not quite keep the triumph from his voice. "The bottom half of that blue plastic straw was coated with white arsenic crystals, so that, at a casual

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glance, it appeared to be the same innocuous sort of blue and white straw as each of the others in the canister. J. Baxter stirred his drink with the straw, as he always did, and in so doing neatly dissolved the arsenic in the opaque collins."

"Suppose I did put the straw in Uncle Baxter's drink," Philip said. "That doesn't prove I manufactured it."

"Of course it does. Obviously, all the straws in the canister could not have been lethally tampered with; you didn't want to murder anyone but your uncle, and there was too much margin for error in tampering with more than one straw. So there was *only* one fatal straw, placed in the canister at some earlier time, placed where you could immediately put your hand on it when the proper moment arose. And since it was you who selected the proper straw—the only one you touched at the bar before the murder—the killer logically could be no one else."

Silence fell thickly over the terrace once again. From far below, there was the faint echo of approaching sirens, but that was the only intruding sound. The eyes of Nora, Nicholas Driscoll, and Arthur Vaughan flicked back and forth between Philip and Professor Aberdeen as the two men faced one another squarely.

Success, triumph! Aberdeen was thinking. *Can this be the beginning of a new career for me? Can it be that, in the future, police officers will call on me when they have a seemingly unsolvable crime on their hands? Can it be that I will become a living embodiment of all those fictional sleuths I've admired for so long?*

The thoughts rolled and tumbled in the professor's mind—but outwardly, he was as grim and authoritative as the situation demanded. He said, "I suggest that you submit to voluntary arrest until the arrival of the police, Philip. You obviously have no weapon; you fully expected to get away with your crime, and you're certainly clever enough not to have brought a gun or some such with you tonight. You can't escape, and to try would only make things that much worse for you. Will you accept your fate as the intelligent young man you are?"

"No," Philip said.

Aberdeen blinked, but he did not lose his composure. "Very well, then, we shall be forced to restrain you physically." He looked at Nora, at Driscoll, at Vaughan. "If the three of you will help me . . ."

"No," Nora said.

"No," Driscoll said.

"No," Vaughan said.

Professor Aberdeen was not certain he had heard correctly. "Did

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all of you say—*no*? All of you?"

"We did," Nora told him.

"But . . . but why?"

"Because Philip didn't kill Sheldrake," Driscoll said.

"What's that?" Aberdeen was incredulous. "Of course he did! I just told you how he did it . . ."

"Nevertheless," Vaughan said, "Philip is not the murderer."

"Then—who is?"

"*You* are," Driscoll answered.

"You quarreled with Uncle Baxter when he threatened to stop donating money to Abbington College," Nora said. "Everyone knows how dedicated you are to Abbington."

"And everyone also knows how fanatical you are on mystery puzzles and things of that nature," Vaughan said. "The police won't wonder at the method of murder, the use of the straw, the melodramatic element."

"Especially," Philip said, "when they find the jar of arsenic crystals, package of blue straws, and bottle of water soluble glue which I hid in one of your kitchen cupboards while you were conducting classes at the school yesterday afternoon."

"But you're obviously a high-strung type," Driscoll said. "After you'd committed the murder, you had an attack of conscience. So you confessed your guilt to us, and then you rushed over to the railing and climbed up on it . . ."

Professor Aberdeen stared at them, and with vivid, undeniable clarity, he understood. Not one murderer, but *four* murderers, each with strong motives for wanting J. Baxter Sheldrake dead, banding together, plotting together, not only outwitting the keenly deductive amateur sleuth but *using* him as an integral pawn in their plot to commit the perfect crime . . .

"No, this is all wrong!" Professor Aberdeen screamed. "It's not supposed to happen like this! Pure logic must always triumph, Justice must always be done! It never happens like this to Sherlock Holmes or Philo Vance or—!"

He was still protesting, still disbelieving, when four pairs of hands lifted him, carried him forward, and dropped him very gently over the terrace railing.

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One should be on guard against that little bit of larceny latent in almost everybody.

Finger Man

"Hannibal Coggins, mass murderer of the 1960's, escaped from the state prison farm early this afternoon. He disappeared shortly after the noon roll call. Coggins is considered to be extremely dangerous."

HE SAID that I could call him Fred.

Now, as I drove through the flat desert country, we listened to the local newscaster announce:

I turned down the volume of the car radio slightly. "They didn't give a description of Coggins."

Fred nodded. "I suppose because

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it might do more harm than good. People would get all excited and turn in dozens of innocent citizens. It's probably enough that the police know what he looks like."

"I remember the case," I said. "Coggins went on a shooting spree and killed eleven people."

"Twelve," Fred said. "One afternoon he got into an argument with his neighbor about a property line and in due course he shot him. Then, feeling that he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, he strolled about the neighborhood shooting people he disliked. He got twelve, including a dentist and a used-car salesman."

"Obviously he wasn't hanged."

"No. The governor at that time apparently had strong feelings about capital punishment. He commuted the sentence."

The radio began playing western country music.

"How far is it to the nearest gas station?" Fred asked.

I glanced at the map on the seat beside me. "About five miles more to Everettville. Where did you say you ran out of gas? I didn't see your car."

"It happened on one of those little side roads. Had to walk more than two miles before I got to the highway."

When I picked up Fred, he had been standing at the side of the road carrying a two-gallon gasoline can and waving an entreating thumb. Ordinarily I might have passed him by, but he wore a business suit, and in this desert country where the traffic is sparse one hesitates to pass people in distress miles and miles from the nearest habitation.

"What line of work are you in?" I asked.

"Haberdashery," Fred said. Then he smiled faintly. "But that's getting to be an old-fashioned word. I own a men's clothing store back in Santa Fe. Was driving west to visit my daughter when I ran out of gas."

I glanced at Fred. His suit seemed to be of a good quality, but I couldn't admire the tailoring of the jacket. The back of the collar gaped away from the neck.

Fred patted his armrest. "Nice car. Chevy, isn't it?"

I nodded and then corrected myself. "No. A Ford. My last car was a Chevy. I keep getting the two mixed up."

Far ahead of us, a small cluster of

by Jack Ritchie

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houses came into view. They grew bigger as we approached, and finally we passed a sign which read: *Everettville Pop. 278.*

Half a dozen cars were parked in front of what appeared to be the town's only cafe.

I glanced at my watch. "Nearly six. Frankly, I could use a bite to eat."

Fred nodded quickly. "Sounds like a pretty good idea to me."

I pulled into the parking area and Fred and I entered the cafe.

It seemed to be fairly well filled with patrons. The three booths were all occupied and only two stools, side by side, appeared to be open at the counter.

A law officer, apparently a sheriff, sat at the far end of the counter eating his supper. He was a somewhat paunchy, middle-aged man wearing sunglasses. He also came equipped with a wide-brimmed white hat and a service revolver on a belt generously studded with cartridges.

Fred and I took the two vacant stools and studied the typewritten menu cards.

Fred looked up at the wall clock. "Excuse me, I think I'd better phone my daughter and explain why I'll be late. Save my stool." He went to the phone booth at the end of the room.

His back was turned toward me, but as I watched him I thought I saw him writing something on the margin of the telephone book.

I studied him for another few seconds and then pulled a paper napkin from its holder. Using my ball-point pen, I printed in block letters:

> Hannibal Coggins, the escaped killer, is sitting next to me at this counter. He is dangerous and probably armed and will not hesitate to kill.

I folded the napkin into a tight wad and rose. I walked past the telephone booth to the jukebox, ostensibly to study the list of records.

Almost at my elbow, the sheriff transported a forkful of mashed potatoes to his mouth.

I glanced at the phone booth again. Fred seemed to be still busy, but was he somehow watching me?

As unobtrusively as possible, I flipped the wadded napkin over the sheriff's shoulder. It bounced off the catsup bottle and came to rest in his saucer of peas.

I strode firmly back to my stool and picked up the menu.

Fred joined me in less than a minute. "Anything look good enough to eat?"

The sheriff appeared behind us. He tapped the shoulder of a burly individual on my right. "Are you Hannibal Coggins?"

"Not him," I whispered fiercely.

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"On my *other* side." I pointed to Fred.

Fred, in turn, pointed a finger at me. "Careful, Sheriff, he's probably armed."

The sheriff's eyes went over both of us. Then he produced the note I'd written and read it aloud.

Fred's mouth gaped slightly.

The sheriff next read from a scrap of paper which had evidently been torn from a telephone book:

> The man on the stool to my right is Hannibal Coggins, who escaped from the state prison farm today. He's a mass killer and extremely dangerous.

I smiled tightly. "Quick thinking, Fred, but *my* note takes precedence."

Fred reached for his back pocket, but stopped when the sheriff's hand went to the butt of his gun.

"My name is Fred Stevens," Fred said stiffly. "I'm from Santa Fe. I've got *full* identification."

"Of course," I said dryly. "And out there in the desert lies the body of a man without a wallet or a suit of clothes." I indicated Fred's collar. "Would a man who claims he owns a haberdashery wear a suit that bulges so badly at the collar? It's little things like that which trip up the criminal."

Fred's voice rose. "I've got square shoulders and it's pretty hard to find a ready-made suit that fits square shoulders." He turned on me. "And what about *you*? You were driving a Ford, but you thought it was a Chevy until you took another look at the nameplate. Speaking of bodies in the desert, there's probably somebody lying out there who used to own a Ford."

The sheriff studied us and then rubbed his jaw. "I don't have any mug shots of Hannibal Coggins yet. The State Police will probably get around to sending me some in a couple of days."

Fred blinked. "But surely you must have a *description* of Hannibal Coggins?"

"Well, yes. But it's pretty general and could fit either one of you, or half a dozen people in town. Suppose I just put *both* of you behind bars until I find out which one is the real Hannibal Coggins?"

Fred protested. "On what *specific* charge do you think you could arrest *both* of us?"

"Litterbugging," the sheriff said. "You two been throwing wads of paper around and that can play hob with the ecology." He put a hand on the butt of his revolver again. "Now stand up and turn around."

We did as we were told.

He searched us, but found no weapons.

"Fine," he said. "Turn around and march out the door. The jailhouse is right next to Harry's Bar."

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It was a short, though dusty, thirty-second walk to the adobe jailhouse. Inside, it was nicely cool. The small building consisted only of an area for the sheriff's desk and filing cabinet and two unoccupied cells.

The sheriff put one of us in each of the cells.

"What do you intend to do now?" Fred demanded. "Wait for the mail?"

"No," the sheriff said. "The simplest thing to do is for me to drive up to Phoenix and have a look at Hannibal Coggins' picture." He picked up the phone, dialed, and got somebody named Jim. He told Jim to come over to the jailhouse.

Jim appeared within ten minutes. He was a thin man in his middle twenties, thoroughly Adam's-appled, and with the usual suntan that ended abruptly at the hatline.

"My deputy," the sheriff explained. He handed Jim a badge and then turned back to us. "I'd like to take your fingerprints along to Phoenix."

Fred and I both protested, but our prints were taken.

After the sheriff left for Phoenix, Jim sat down at the desk and picked up a true detective magazine. He paged through it, found something interesting, and began reading, his lips moving slowly.

Fred went to the bars of his cell. "How long will it take the sheriff to get to Phoenix?"

"Two hours there and two hours back," Jim said.

Fred watched him read for a while. "So you're the deputy?"

Jim nodded. "Part-time—whenever I'm needed. Otherwise I work at Bud's Garage."

"How much does deputizing pay?"

"Three-fifteen an hour. And when I get in six months' time—that's 960 hours—I become eligible for health insurance."

"How many hours do you have in now?"

"Exactly 623. Took me five years of part-time to accumulate that."

Fred reached for his wallet and pulled out a number of bills. "There's five hundred dollars in this roll." He folded the bills and tossed them out of his cell. "Well, well, Deputy, look what dropped out of your pocket."

Jim frowned and shook his head. "No, siree. We'll have none of that hanky-panky while I'm on duty."

He got a broom and pushed the money back to the cell bars. "It might be more polite to hand it back to you personally, but we're not supposed to even touch the prisoners' money."

I lay down on my bunk. After a while I groaned slightly.

The deputy looked my way.

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"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I have a terrible pain in my side," I said. I groaned again.

The deputy scratched his ear. "If it's appendicitis, there's nothing much I can do except phone the doctor. Only we don't have any here in town. I'd have to get Red Rock."

"I'm positive it isn't appendicitis," I said. "But perhaps you could bring me a glass of water and a couple of aspirin?"

The deputy found some aspirin in the desk drawer and drew a paper cupful of water from the water cooler.

He put the cup and the aspirin on the end of a narrow board and shoved it through the bars toward me.

"I'm not allowed to go in there," he explained. "Especially when I'm alone. You can never tell what might happen."

I swallowed the aspirin, drank the water, and lay down again.

In the next cell, Fred chuckled. "Nice try."

I turned on him indignantly. "I don't know what you're talking about. I get this stitch in my side during moments of stress."

After a while, I dozed off.

The ring of the telephone woke me. The deputy reached for the phone and listened. Finally he hung up and smiled in our direction. "That was the sheriff calling from Phoenix. Seems as soon as he got there he found out that the real Hannibal Coggins was just picked up in Stafford. I guess we owe you two some sort of an apology."

He rose, got the ring of keys, and released both Fred and me.

I was a bit embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Fred, but I could have *sworn* you were Coggins."

Fred nodded. "I felt exactly the same way about you." He sighed. "Well, I guess I'll get my gas can filled."

The deputy consulted his watch. "It's eight-thirty. Bud's Garage stays open until nine."

Fred and I went back to my car, still parked at the cafe, and he picked up his gas can. "Maybe I can get somebody at Bud's Garage to drive me back to my car."

I felt that possibly I owed Fred something. "I'll drive you back. I really don't have anything important to do at this time of the night anyway."

We got gas at Bud's Garage and then headed back in the direction we had come. It was a rather beautiful night, with a full moon and a clear sky.

I drove nearly ten miles before Fred directed me to turn off onto an ungraveled side road. I had to slow down considerably to negotiate the rough surface.

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"There's one thing I don't understand, Fred," I said. "If you aren't Hannibal Coggins, why did you try to bribe your way out of jail? Wouldn't it have been simpler—and cheaper—just to wait until the sheriff proved that you weren't Coggins?"

Fred sighed. "I was afraid you'd think of that. And if you work on it a little more, you'll probably come up with the answer." He pressed open the glove compartment of my car and began rummaging around.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said, "but almost anything will do." He found a screwdriver. "If the sheriff had processed my fingerprints in Phoenix, he would have discovered that Hannibal Coggins isn't the only person in the world who's wanted by the police." He regarded me severely. "Ever been stabbed by a screwdriver?"

"No," I said uneasily. "I can't say that I have." I experienced the familiar tension stitch in my side and winced.

"Relax," Fred said. "Killing isn't my trade. That's why I went through the trouble of turning in what I thought was Hannibal Coggins. I thought that way I might be saving some innocent people's lives."

I felt a certain amount of relief.

He hefted the screwdriver again. "Just the same, remember that this weapon puts me in charge of the situation."

Some two hundred yards ahead of us I could make out the shadowy bulk of a car parked slightly to one side of the narrow road.

Fred gave an order. "Stop the car right here."

I put my foot on the brake. The car swerved to the right as we came to an abrupt stop and Fred fell over me.

He quickly untangled himself. "Now, watch that! You could have gotten yourself killed if it were anybody else but me."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but the car swerves when I step on the brakes. I think one of the front tires is soft."

Fred took my car keys out of the ignition and pocketed them. "I'll leave the keys in the road when I pull away. Now just sit right there and don't move until I'm gone."

Obviously, Fred didn't want me to get close enough to his car to copy the license number.

He picked up the road map on the seat next to me and pocketed that too. "I wouldn't want to get lost again." He opened the car door and left with the two-gallon can of gasoline, glancing back occasionally as he made his way to the shadows of his car. After a while his lights went on and the car pulled away.

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I watched the taillights diminish in the distance and then got out of my car and walked down the road.

In the bright moonlight I had no trouble finding my car keys where Fred had said they would be.

I looked once more at the fading taillights and then made my way back to the car.

Poor Fred, I thought, *he's heading for Nelson's Butte.*

With the two gallons in his tank, he should be able to get there and a little beyond—or a little back—depending on his decision. That was all, however.

On the map there is an asterisk next to Nelson's Butte. Yet so many people, it seems, cannot find the footnotes on a map, and evidently Fred was one of them.

Nelson's Butte is a ghost town and not a soul has lived there in over seventy years. Fred wouldn't find any gas stations there, and the nearest live town was more than forty miles farther on.

I started my car, carefully negotiated a turn, and drove back to the highway.

If I'd been an honest citizen, I would have driven back to Everettville and told the deputy approximately where he could pick up Fred.

However, I wasn't an honest citizen.

I, too, have my trade and I ply it well. When I had stepped on the brakes at Fred's order, I had turned the steering wheel slightly so that he would fall against me.

Now I patted the side pocket in which I had Fred's wallet. It contained at least five hundred dollars.

Not bad for one night's work.

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Security is not always so highly regarded by woman.

ON THE OCCASION of the third New Year's Eve since he bought the elegant, English manor type house in Forest Gardens, Warren Ullrich arrived home shortly after seven. His place was in deep darkness while the neighboring houses were brilliant, some decorated with winking holiday ornaments not yet removed, for Warren was a bachelor who had neither family nor servants living in the big house. He gave no parties and did not encourage visitors.

At 41, Warren had considerable good looks and an abundance of cash in flow from the Warren Ullrich Construction Company, building contractors in high repute. Money and success, in that order, had brought Warren respect in the community. Since he seemed a pleasant sort, most people also liked him and forgave him for being a

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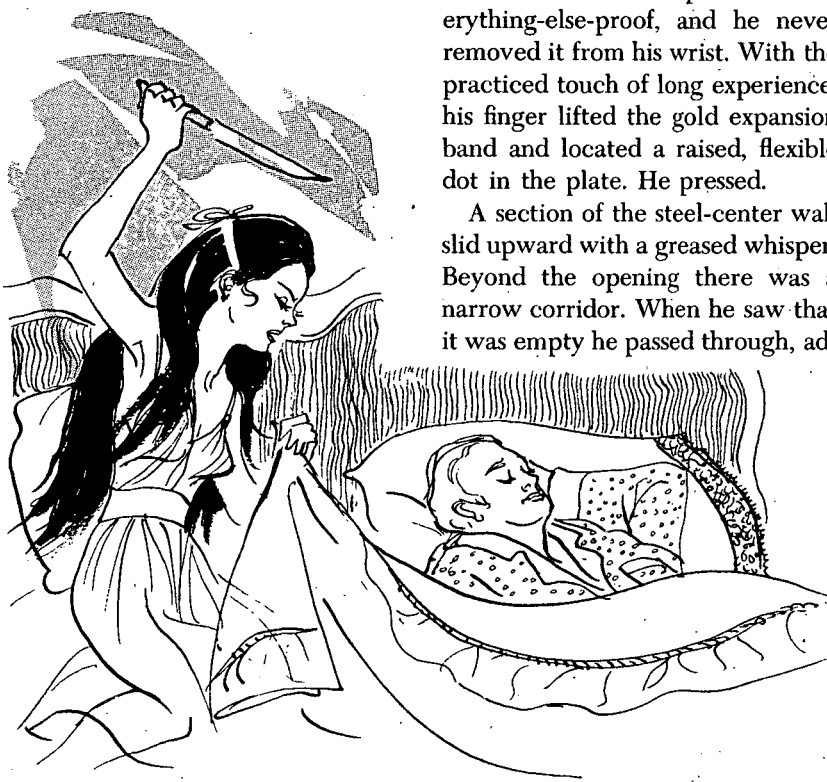
loner, an eccentric who was apparently surrounded by empty rooms, and lived in spacious solitude.

Approaching up the drive, Warren poked a button beneath the dash of his car. The electric mouth of the garage yawned and swallowed him, and sealed him inside. Alighting with a sack containing a chilled bottle of vintage champagne, he fingered a light switch, then keyed a solid oak door. Locking it behind him, he mounted to the second floor on stairs constructed to bridge the lower regions of the house, which he seldom used.

At the top of the stairs he turned on hallway lights and moved along, passing two bedrooms and a study. Confronted then by a wall upon which there was the mural of a mountain lake, Warren paused. The champagne bottle tucked under his arm, he groped for the invisible trigger beneath the back plate of his custom-made electric watch. The watch was waterproof and everything-else-proof, and he never removed it from his wrist. With the practiced touch of long experience, his finger lifted the gold expansion band and located a raised, flexible dot in the plate. He pressed.

A section of the steel-center wall slid upward with a greased whisper. Beyond the opening there was a narrow corridor. When he saw that it was empty he passed through, ad-



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vancing over a cushion of burgundy carpet. To his rear, the portal in the wall had swiftly closed.

It was a simple and practical arrangement, designed for another purpose. It had once been a small, intimate den where the elite came to gamble for high stakes behind soundproof, windowless walls, in a manufactured climate. Here one could buy drinks and even sticks of grass, it was said, as well as more exotic entertainments in private rooms.

The place was eventually closed; quietly, without any publicity, for among the rich patrons there was much power and influence.

Warren had heard the story from his chief electrician on an industrial project. The man swore that he had personally supervised the wiring of the concealed rooms, plus the installation of the remote-control door. The electrician had been reminded of the experience that morning, when he passed the house and noticed a sign which offered it for sale.

Warren had asked a few questions, pretending only a detached interest. This was several months after his all-consuming, compulsive attachment to Carla Fenton had been given the ax, and still sick behind his casual facade, he had been brooding.

When the real estate agent walked him through the house, the remote-control door was raised. The agent, perhaps ignorant of its history, introduced that section as a special wing created as a complete unit to house an additional family.

Warren would have been willing to pay half as much again for the place when he borrowed the key and returned alone, to discover that the device of the door and the soundproof rooms had been left intact. He bought the house free and clear, adding the watch control gadget and making a few minor alterations behind the steel-buttressed walls.

From the corridor, Warren now entered a cozy livingroom, exquisitely furnished. Carla Fenton reclined upon a sofa. Head propped by a pillow, she watched a color television set.

Warren set the champagne bottle on the cocktail table beside her, and kissed her forehead. She gave only a sullen glance to the champagne before shifting her eyes to him.

"New Year's Eve, baby," he explained. "A little celebration."

"I *know* that it's New Year's," she said heavily. "That much I do know. So what's to celebrate?"

With a shrug he reduced the volume of the TV and crossed to the bar. "That negative approach is only going to make you unhappy, Carla-baby," he said. "You've never

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quite learned to adapt, you know."

She eased her stockinged feet to the floor and sat up, adjusting her skirt around long, superb legs. She was still only 28, had chestnut hair to the middle of her back, sleepy, storm-cloud eyes, a flaring, prominent nose, a haughty-rich mouth.

All of her movements and gestures were languid. There was an intense stillness about her, a studied, unnatural calm. Even her flat, colorless manner of speaking suggested anchored emotions straining below the surface.

"What's it like out?" she said.

"Beginning to snow again," he answered, returning from the bar with glasses. He wrenched the cork from the bottle and poured.

"Snowing hard?"

"No. Just drifting down."

She lifted her glass and drank indifferently as he settled beside her. "I used to love the snow," she said. "But that was long, long ago and I've forgotten. It's white, isn't it, Warren? Comes down in those moist, powdery little flakes?"

"You're not going off on another one of those needling jags, are you? When the snow gets a good hold on the ground, we'll go out back and wade in it, same as we did last year. Okay?"

She nodded. "Another guarded little frolic, for ten minutes—after midnight. Thanks. That's extremely generous of you, Warren dear. Perfectly magnanimous, darling."

He sipped in silence.

"Although you would never admit it to me," she continued evenly after lighting a cigarette, "I imagine there are private moments when you have your doubts. When you have a crushing sense of guilt. Basically, I believe you're sensitive, Warren. There must be times when you're overwhelmed by the enormity of this thing—the—the brutal selfishness and depravity of it."

"Shut up, Carla," he said softly.

"But of course you can't be entirely sane, or you couldn't bear it. And it works both ways. I'm not too sure of my own sanity because, you see, I *have* adapted, Warren. I keep the rooms clean and tidy. Your dinner is cooking. And now, after three years, in desperation I'm even sharing your bed. So on the surface, at least, I've become your wife. *Your* wife—not the wife of Dennis Widner, another of your victims. Poor, tortured Dennis, who will never know what became of me."

His features clenched, Warren sat with his eyes squeezed shut, and was tempted to cover his ears. "Carla," he said gently, though he had the urge to shout, "didn't we agree that further arguments are useless and destructive? The subject is closed, honey. For all time."

She got up and began to pace

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thoughtfully across the room, his eyes following her. She was quite tall, and the sweet grace of her back, as it swiftly tapered to narrow waist and soft flare of hip, never failed to excite him.

She halted with her face pressed against a wall. Turning, she said, "It seems I can never get over the strangeness of walls without windows. No way to look out at the world. Right, Warren?"

"There's nothing out there, honey, but problems. Trouble and despair. You're safe here. Protected and loved. Relax, Carla. Find your peace and contentment."

She made a bitter sound. "Now I see what holds you together, Warren. It's that incredible ego."

She returned and poised herself directly in front of him. Arms folded, she became focused, intent. "So we're at the brink of another year. Three hundred sixty-five days, all precisely and monotonously identical."

"Stop circling and jabbing," he said. "Just tell me what's on your mind."

"I'm going to ask just one more time," she said. "Warren, will you let me go?"

Standing, he smiled and touched her cheek, as if placating a little girl. "I think not. To let you go would be disastrous. For both of us." He started out of the room, turned. "Call me when dinner's ready, will you, baby?"

They watched the arrival of the new year on TV, the scene shifting from city to city as all the happy people embraced and loudly congratulated themselves on the prospect of that marvelous good fortune which is automatically insured by merely turning a page of the calendar to January 1.

Carla accepted Warren's New Year kiss with a pretense of sudden affection, though she did not follow him when he said he was going to bed. She was enjoying the TV program, she told him, and was not yet sleepy.

But when he left the room she turned down the volume and sat with her back to the set, really *hating* it, wanting to *smash* it into fragments, thus destroying all the pretty pictures of the *silly* people having glorious *fun* out there in the *free* world.

By two in the morning she had smoked half a pack of cigarettes while trying to make up her mind. The simple reason why she could not kill him in his sleep and escape still remained, frustrating her, goading her fury.

As he had warned her from the beginning, she did not know the secret of the single door to freedom. If she killed him, she would be

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trapped forever, with only a corpse for company. The supply of food which he bought once a week would soon be exhausted, and since the walls were soundproof, she would not be able to signal her presence in the house, even if someone came close enough to hear.

Yet the odds that she could find the means to operate the door once Warren was dead had multiplied in her favor. Although he would not allow her to be anywhere in the corridor when he made his exits, she had learned to spy from a distance, while crouching in the livingroom.

At first she could not read a single clue. Standing close to the door, he touched nothing with his hands, but the door immediately slid up and fell back again when he passed through.

It had occurred to her that he must press something beneath the carpet with his foot, but endless hunting and poking had not revealed the gimmick. After discarding many other theories worked up laboriously from her limited knowledge, she had decided that the door was opened by an object which he held in his hand.

There *had* to be some little transmitter thing which he kept hidden near him in the bedroom, but it could not be uncovered without awakening him. His subconscious was set with a hair-trigger alarm, arousing him at the slightest unusual sound or movement.

In any case, it seemed inevitable that she would find the gadget once she had killed him. Regardless, better to die of starvation than endure another year, and another, and another.

It was after four a.m. when she crept into the bedroom, the long, heavy carving knife cool against her thigh, where she had tied it with a length of cord.

As she undressed in the darkness, he stirred, but did not awaken. After she climbed into bed, she lay motionless for some ten minutes before she grasped the handle of the knife, eased it free, then held it in striking position so that when she threw off the covers with her left hand, she could at the same instant turn and swing the knife down with her right, sinking it into his chest.

It took another ten minutes, during which she lay rigid and trembling, before she could steam up courage to make the move. But then it went well—exactly as planned—except that at the last second, when she was coiled to plunge the knife, it was as if her arm had locked, had frozen in position. Perhaps her conscience, even in these circumstances, could not be reprogrammed to permit killing Warren in cold blood, defenseless in sleep.

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She lowered the knife and slipped it under the mattress. Then she turned away from him and softly wept.

In the darkness beside her, Warren heard the muted sobs and smiled just a little, feeling a certain pride and joy that she had come to the limit of her endurance and still could not kill him.

He had closed his eyes for periods of time, but never his ears, and had not been asleep when she entered the room. He had known that she was at the breaking point, and long observation of her moods had told him that, if not tonight, some night soon she might take the last way out, gambling that she could kill him and then dig up the secret of the door; but he had caught the wink of the knife as she undressed, and was prepared to roll out of reach.

From the outset, Warren was convinced that he understood women as well as it was possible to understand them; women in general and Carla in particular. He knew that training and habit made it nearly impossible for her to kill unless in self-defense, or unless a continuous pattern of cruelty broke her sanity. However, though he held her confined, in all other ways he was most kind and considerate, and always as affectionate as she would allow him to be.

Yes, for a person like Carla it was no simple matter to kill a man who treated her with absolute kindness and respect.

So thinking, lulled by the unmistakable proof of his safety, Warren sank into a deep, unbroken sleep.

Next morning Warren went out, and Carla returned the knife to the kitchen. Then for hours she sat pondering a solution which did not include murder, though Warren certainly deserved killing if anyone did, but not the least alternative came to her. Overcome by the deepest melancholy, she was in a nearly catatonic state when Warren returned.

At first she did not speak to him because she could not shake her stupor. When she saw that he was upset, she kept her silence, uttering not a word for two days in a campaign of silence to force him to lose his eternal patience, his idiotic good temper. Then he might beat her and she could rationalize, could justify killing him.

But Warren quickly adapted to her mood and seemed no longer disturbed by her silence. He would calmly read or watch television, or sit in peaceful contemplation, apparently content just to be in her presence. Observing silence too, he waited complacently for her to

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come to him with the first words of conversation.

It was maddening! She had started the game and he was winning it—with no visible effort.

On the fifth day, the moment he had left for the office with a pat on her cheek—but not a word of goodbye—she became hysterical. For a time she sobbed out of control, then felt stupidly indifferent.

After indifference came a tornado of anger which caused her to run screaming through the empty rooms, knocking over lamps, yanking paintings from the walls, smashing all the clever, expensive bottles and jars on her dressing table; ripping the beautiful but meaningless dresses he had bought her, those lovely gowns in which she would be all dressed up with no place to go.

In a final act of defiance, she raced back to the livingroom, plucked a fallen lamp from the floor and used the base of it to shatter that great mocking eye of the color television.

She stood then in the center of the room, shaking with rage and frustration. She thought fleetingly of setting the place afire, but self-preservation rejected the plan. With her fury spent, she began to weep again. When she became quiet, there was in her another of those frequent feelings of claustrophobia, which on this occasion she could not contain.

In panic she picked up the heavy lamp, the one employed to wreck the television. Wailing insanely, she flew from the livingroom into the exit corridor with the mindless intent to batter down that unyielding three-year barrier to fresh air and freedom: the remote-control door.

She had come almost within striking distance when she halted abruptly, the lamp slipping from her fingers.

As with all devices created by imperfect man, this one was not built for eternal service without repair or adjustment. On this particular morning, though doubtless the door had obeyed the signal to rise, it had not come back to rest at floor level to lock in place. Instead, the door had given up, had not entirely closed, leaving nearly a foot of clearance.

With heart-jolting excitement, Carla bellied down at the edge, made her body flat and rigid, and exhaled. She worked her way into the space, squeezing in until she was jammed under the door, its edge at about the center of her back.

That was it—the end of it. She had a glimpse of freedom across the soft blue carpet in the wide hallway beyond; but she was painfully, immovably wedged under the door.

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There was not even room to take a deep breath. She felt smothered; she could neither inch forward nor return.

Carla was ready to panic again as she wondered what would happen if the pressure of her back jarred the door loose from whatever caused it to hang up. The solid, steel-plated weight of it could mash her like a frail bug under heel.

Then she closed her eyes and reached for the cool center of herself. Finding it, she ordered her muscles to relax. Think small and slim, she told herself. Think round and slithering. Think free!

Loose and boneless and pliable, she was a pool of liquid seeping under a door. In seconds she was out. Running. Stumbling down the stairs, wrestling the front door, hurling it wide . . .

Carla was in the phone booth of a drugstore. She couldn't decide whether to call the police first—or Dennis Widner. Three years and seventeen days ago, she had been about to marry Dennis.

The wedding was to have taken place on a Saturday, months after she had chopped Warren in favor of Dennis, though Warren had phoned now and then and twice had taken her to lunch. It had all been so very friendly and casual that she had been snowed into believing that she was looking at the *real* Warren Ullrich when she walked into the trap.

The way it happened, Warren had been waiting outside in his car when she came home from the office on Wednesday, three days before the wedding. He wanted to know if she would have just one farewell drink with him, for old-times' sake. She thought it just a bit odd that he hadn't phoned first; but he seemed rather pathetic, and impulsively she agreed.

He took her to an unfamiliar lounge, a quaint little place which turned out to be only a minute from the house in which she was to be locked away for the next three years.

As one drink became two, Warren confessed that his feelings had not changed. Though he had been spurned for some reason which defied logic, having to do with the mystery of female psychology, he would love her obsessively, eternally.

Warren admitted frankly that Dennis Widner was a very solid type, and not only handsome, but about eight years younger. However, even objectively, if one could be objective under the circumstances (disarming smile), he did not feel that she would be happy with Dennis, who seemed as flawless as a machine—and just as mechanical.

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No doubt the reason Dennis lived with his mother was also related to mechanics. Someone had to wind him up, and mom had the key.

When Carla got angry and threatened to leave, he said he was just kidding, of course. It was not always easy to be a loser when there was so much at stake. He was only all too human.

She forgave him, especially since his eyes were moist, and listened attentively while he tried with impressive humility and sincerity to convince her that she should at least postpone the wedding to spend just a little time with him while giving her decision a closer look.

When she refused, he came on gallant, saying that he had rather expected her reaction and had prepared a wedding gift which was much too large for wrapping and delivery. Would she like to see it?

She had answered, with an uncertain smile of gratitude, that she must hurry home to dress for dinner out; but if it didn't take too long . . .

It was just a few blocks to the house, which she found to be grand and surprising—and unreal. Warren said that he had bought it for her, as a place to live in with *him*, after they were married. Now, since this was never to be, he wanted her to have the house as a wedding gift.

There was then the faint smell of something perverse, if not treacherous. Whatever, it was beyond tracing. She told Warren that she could not possibly accept the house. But curious, she couldn't resist the temptation when he invited her at least to take a look.

A few days after the house had gobbled her up, Warren told her that the police had been around to his office. He hadn't seen Carla for weeks, he informed them, though he had talked to her on the phone. The cops gave no hint of being suspicious. They went off, and another pair of detectives came back in a week with more questions. They also found him guiltless, and departed, seemingly forever.

As for Dennis Widner—what Warren didn't know was that she had *always* been in love with Dennis, but Dennis didn't take notice, didn't wake up until she told him she was going to marry Warren.

Now, Carla looked up Dennis in the directory. There was a new address and phone number, so apparently he was no longer staying with his mother. That in itself was alarming. However, at this time of day he should be at Margate Manufacturing, the office where she had worked as his secretary. It was a job obtained with the help of her father, who was a purchasing agent for the company.

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Carla didn't have a dime to put in the phone box, and couldn't think what to do. There had been a few dollars in her apartment, though it would long ago have been rented, her possessions likely stored by her father, who was the only relative she had left worthy of the name since the death of her mother.

She had deposited money in the bank across the street from Margate. So she walked until she saw a cruising cab and flagged it down.

The three hundred and sixty dollars in her savings account, plus the accumulated interest, was on record at the bank. She explained that her passbook had been lost, and after a slight delay for the red-tape procedures, withdrew a hundred on her signature.

She paid the cabdriver and went directly to Dennis Widner's office. Anything she heard from her father would be secondhand, and the strain of waiting to see Dennis face-to-face would be unbearable.

It was entirely possible that he was married, but if not, how would he take the news that she had been Warren Ullrich's cellmate for three years? Dennis had disliked Warren at once, his view probably distorted by a certain natural jealousy. Further, Dennis was a bit square, and the implications of such togetherness, enforced or not, might turn him off before she could pick up the pieces.

It was a rotten situation, but she decided to play it by ear, withholding the truth until she could probe to see what, if anything, remained between them.

A small, slim blonde, quite pretty, though prim and frosty-eyed, sat at Carla's old desk behind the enclosure outside Dennis' office.

"Is, uh, is Mr. Widner in his office?"

"Well, I couldn't say. Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but he'll be most anxious to see me, I'm sure. My name is Carla Fenton."

"Carla Fenton?" The girl's eyes did a crazy little dance.

"Yes—Carla Fenton. And not just any old Carla Fenton—*the* Carla Fenton."

"I see." Cool composure returned. "Well, let me step into the office and ask if he's busy."

In seconds Dennis was poised in the open doorway, his eyes staring right out of his skull, though his crisp, confident, bright-eyed-executive face labeled him built to withstand even this startling turn of events.

"My God," he said. "Is it Carla?"

"Well, I wasn't quite sure myself until you confirmed it, Dennis," she said with a nervous little smile. She

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went toward him, half expecting that he would embrace her, hug her to him in a burst of emotion. Instead, he simply stepped aside and waved her in, his expression dark, fathomless.

He closed the door and sat examining her critically from a corner of his desk, cool in his immaculate blue suit, sparkling white shirt and gray, monogrammed tie.

"Carla, where *have* you been?" he accused, the slow shaking of his head a condemnation. "Three years and not a squeak from you."

"Were you waiting three years to scold me?" she asked, trying to keep her tone light. "Is that all you have for me, Dennis?"

"What did you expect? Three years is not exactly out to lunch, Carla. I'm slightly disoriented. You deserted *me*, not vice versa. And for a time I was in shock. I was a zombie. But the wounds healed, the scars are invisible, and now you want me to bleed again. On command. Right?"

She sagged into a chair. "I didn't expect a brass band. But I did hope to find a human being with some human warmth. Dennis, didn't it occur to you that I was in deep trouble?"

"Sure. I had the whole police department searching for a single clue." He went around the desk, sat and lit his pipe. "But you don't look damaged, just pale. And if you were in trouble, why didn't you ask for help?"

"I couldn't."

He nodded. "Okay, perhaps I'm jumping to conclusions. Tell it from the beginning."

"I'm not ready to do that, Dennis. Not in your present frame of mind. Just believe me, I didn't desert you. I didn't leave willingly, I couldn't return until now. No way at all!"

"I do believe you," he said. "And I'm glad you're back." It was a throwaway line, flat and unemotional. "Tell me the rest when you feel up to it, Carla."

She hesitated. "While I was gone—did you get married, Dennis?"

"No." He sucked his pipe. "But I do have plans. Definite plans. The sweet little blonde out there." Reversed, his pipe took aim at the door.

"Your secretary?"

"Mmm."

"My replacement?"

"Yes. I mean—"

"Marriage goes with the job." She grinned terribly. "You get two keys—one to the office, and one to that big old heart. Huh?"

She sighed to his silence. "Well, that—that doesn't leave me anyone to come home to, does it? Except my father. Certainly *he* won't show

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me his back. He'll welcome me."

"Carla?"

"Yes, yes, dear love."

"About your father. He got sick last year and they took him to the hospital for a quite standard operation. But there were complications and he—"

"Died!" she finished. "Right?"

"I'm sorry," he said, and *finally*, as she began to cry, he crossed the room to place a limp hand on her shoulder.

It was not that they were lacking in compassion for the human condition at the police station, but they were harried, preoccupied with other victims already at hand to file complaints, not to mention the booking of assorted criminals. So it amounted to the same thing: a feeling of impersonal, assembly-line justice.

Carla sat with three other sad-eyes who were ahead of her, and waited for a detective to write up her case. Meantime, she calculated her future prospects. It was bye-bye to Dennis and farewell to Dad. No place to live. No job. Something over two hundred in the bank, less than a hundred in pocket. And to comfort her, there was only the dubious, legal sympathy of the law.

Pretty grim. Not at all promising.

Another victim was called, her turn coming, but she used the public phone and quietly drifted from the station.

When the cab circled around and delivered her to the front of the house, she told the driver to wait. Under *no* circumstance was he to leave without her—especially if he wanted to collect a ten-buck tip.

She went to the door. Warren opened it—a bit warily—and she stepped in.

"I phoned because I thought maybe you had run off and gone into hiding," Carla explained.

"No, after you got away I didn't give a damn what happened to me. Anyhow, I had this crazy hunch that you might not tell the police. When people live together for three years, no matter what the conditions, they get pretty close." He gave a knowing smile.

She nodded. "That's true. Now listen, Warren, it should be obvious that we can't ever live *here* again, even for a night. So grab what you need for now."

He kissed her and started off.

"Hurry, darling," she called after him. "Not that I don't trust you, but I kept the cab waiting to take us into town."

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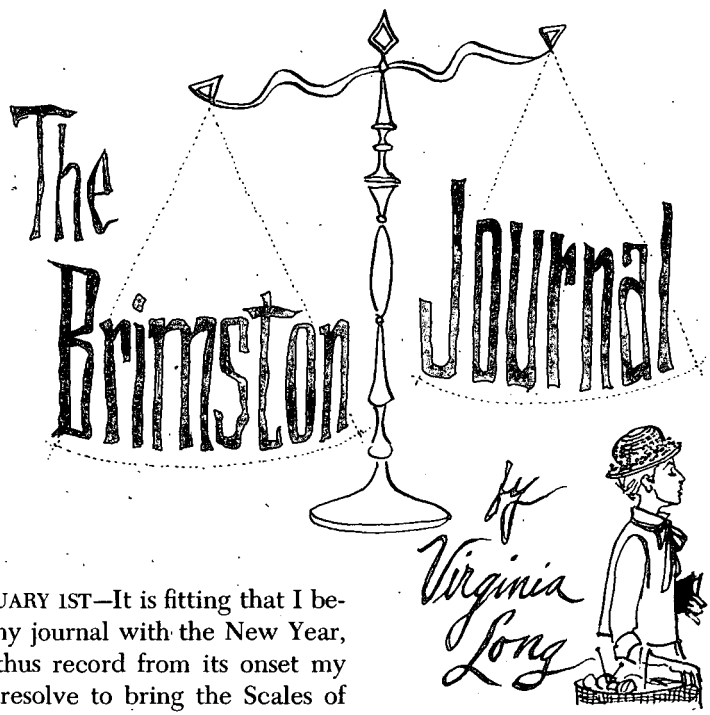
If frequently crying "Wolf!" does not balance the scales, it may serve to tip them to the favorable side.



JANUARY 1ST—It is fitting that I begin my journal with the New Year, and thus record from its onset my new resolve to bring the Scales of Justice into balance. An eye for an eye, the Good Book says. A tooth for a tooth. A life for a life. It is a stern and awesome principle, and I have too long evaded its authority.

Evaded, not ignored—for thirty years my life has been shaped and shadowed by the inescapable implications of the Scriptural Commandment. If a life is destroyed and none surrendered in its stead, the scales are askew and the Eternal Order is subtly disturbed. All Creation limps imperceptibly, like a pack animal unevenly loaded, until balance is restored. I have given much thought to this problem, and have determined that I can no longer de-

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lay an attempt to bring about Cosmic Equilibrium. It will require the most meticulous planning.

JANUARY 5TH—This morning I put on my good blue dress, my hat with the small flowers around the brim, and placed my toothbrush, toilet articles and a change of underthings in my old black knitting bag. I then rode the 13th Avenue bus to Police Headquarters.

I am not familiar with procedure in such matters, and wished to be thoroughly prepared if they should take me directly to a cell. As it turned out, my preparations were unnecessary, although I was glad I had my knitting to occupy me. I was required to sit for a long period of time on a hard, wooden chair at the side of a room while policemen scurried in and out and made numerous telephone calls. Polite young officers offered me cups of coffee (which I of course refused) and questioned me, brusquely at first, then with curiosity and ill-concealed disbelief, and finally with what seemed to be sympathy and amusement. It was most distressing. Would one not think that they would be pleased to have the solution to a baffling crime presented to them free of charge, so to speak? But I am ahead of my account.

When I arrived at Police Headquarters, I looked around carefully and determined that a man sitting at a high desk or counter structure was the proper person to approach. I thought I should be concise and to the point, so I walked up to him and held out the previous day's newspaper with its headline: BRUTAL MURDER BAFFLES POLICE.

I enunciated very clearly, "My name is Miss Althea Brimston. I wish to confess to the murder of Donald Kenyon."

I was quite gratified by the initial reaction of the sergeant. He stared at me, then asked me sternly to repeat my name, wrote it down along with my address, and immediately summoned a superior who took charge of me. I could feel the floor under my feet shift ponderously as the Divine Scales began to right themselves.

But alas, I am after all an amateur at murder, and too late I realized that I should have studied my subject more thoroughly. I had not so much as strolled down the dark street where the poor creature's body was found. I could not describe the manner in which he was dressed and, although I blush to admit it, I did not even know that the murder weapon was a *pocket* knife. I had noticed only the word "knife" in the newspaper account, and so I claimed to have used an eight-inch kitchen knife with a serrated edge. I assumed that such homely details

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would validate my confession; instead, they nullified it. I shall be more observant next time.

JANUARY 22ND—This evening's paper has just arrived, and I am so excited I can scarcely hold my pen. The omens are right, the vibrations are perfect. Obviously I should have waited for such a sign, instead of making a spectacle of myself in the Kenyon affair. (It has since been solved, incidentally.)

A doctor has been found shot to death in a rather unsavory section of the city. He was discovered lying in a pool of blood in a first-floor front apartment of a run-down, two-story building. There was a bullet wound in his right shoulder, and another in the precise center of his forehead. The room was in wild disorder, indicating a struggle, and a lamp was overturned and broken. Investigation has revealed that he was an abortionist, and the police speculate that he was killed by someone enraged by a mishandled operation or possibly by someone to whom he refused his services.

I prefer to believe the former, which makes my course of action appropriate. If the scales are already balanced, there is no need for me to surrender my person. No matter. In the wider view, the scales have been atilt for thirty years, and only when a personal adjustment is made can I be at peace.

My own personality was not fully formed at that time nor my convictions in any way firm, or I might have acted then. Of course I *was* twenty years old, but a very young and naive twenty. I was blinded and overwhelmed by the unexpected attentions of Carlton Herrod, the brilliant lawyer for whom I typed and filed, ran errands and dusted books. I was a fool, but perhaps all young girls are fools when they are in love. I would not know, for I have had no other experience.

I remember the day my foolishness ended forever. I was afraid to tell him, and justifiably so as it turned out, because when I did he was furious. However, he immediately made arrangements and drove me that night to a dark, deserted house where we waited in painful silence until a car stopped and a stocky, furtive man smelling of perspiration led us into the house.

I have no excuse for my sheeplike acquiescence. I was in shock, perhaps, or else so dreadfully upset by the rapidly transpiring events that I was not able to think clearly. It is shameful to me, even now, to admit that the awful numbness that accompanied me throughout the evening was occasioned, above all, by the knowledge that Carlton Herrod would never again associate himself with me in any fashion.

Herrod. I have often reflected

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upon the appropriateness of his name. The slaughter of innocents is not a modern innovation.

Naturally, I realize that we were all three equally guilty, but it was the nameless, faceless doctor whose hands snuffed out that minuscule life. Even after all these years, a life is owed for that one, tiny though it was. Therefore, I find this newest unsolved murder in our city to be ideal for my purpose. I shall assume the responsibility and pay the penalty for the death of an abortionist, and at the same time atone for an old, shared guilt. One of us *must* pay and in this manner, symbolically at least, two of us will have done so.

JANUARY 24TH—I am extremely discouraged. I was so certain that all would go well. I rode in a taxi yesterday to a spot within a block of the scene of the murder. I strolled, with the air of a middle-aged woman taking her daily constitutional, along the street and through the area for more than an hour. I observed the street names, the house numbers, even counted the garbage cans at the curb in front of the death house. I walked by slowly and peered into the windows and up the stairs. When I returned home, I studied the newspaper accounts and memorized the description of the automatic weapon from which the fatal shot was fired. I was most thorough.

When I was sure that I was familiar with all details, I went again to the police station. I was so confident that when I packed my knitting bag with the essentials, I added my Bible and a small volume of inspirational verse that has given me much pleasure in idle moments. Surely there would be many idle moments in prison.

I was quite elated when I faced the sergeant at his desk and said, "My name is Miss Althea Brimston. I wish to confess to the murder of Dr. Will Harrison."

It is a cruel twist of fate that only an hour earlier they had arrested and obtained a detailed confession from a young man whose wife had recently died as a result of a bungled abortion performed by Dr. Harrison.

Ah, well, in this particular instance the scales are again in balance, so all is not lost. The policemen, however, were not as polite and respectful as before. Indeed, I saw one young officer direct a puzzled glance at another, and the second officer moved his hand in a circular motion with one finger pointing to his temple. Then they both grinned broadly, ignoring my reproving stare. As I left, it was difficult to walk with dignity, the world was so tilted and off-balance beneath my feet.

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MARCH 15TH—I do not feel at all like writing tonight, but I must abandon neither my journal nor my purpose. It is most depressing to act justly, to attempt to right an old wrong, and to fail so miserably and so consistently. Three times since I last wrote I have tried to give myself into custody. The police were more civil than on the previous occasion, but I had the distinct impression that as soon as they had showed me out the door, hilarity erupted in their midst. I feel very old and useless and ridiculous tonight, but I must not give up. Perhaps I should set my mind to more practical methods of attaining the Cosmic Balance I seek.

MARCH 18TH—There is much excitement and great indignation in the city today. This morning's headlines read: PROMINENT JUDGE SLAIN. Many details of the crime are given, as is natural in a case involving an important citizen. The judge was found in the study of his luxurious town house, after he had failed to join his wife, children and grandchildren at their country estate for the weekend. He had sent his wife ahead because he had an evening appointment, about which he had seemed both disturbed and secretive. Evidently the killer was known to him, as there was no sign of forced entry or a struggle.

Examination of the body revealed that the murder weapon was a long, slender, pointed object, an ice pick or some such thing, which entered the upper abdominal area and penetrated the left lung. The only lead the police have is a report that a neighbor across the street saw a tall, slight figure carrying a blue plaid valise or bag, walking briskly along the street about dusk.

Naturally I shall go to the police station immediately. I see no need to pack my knitting bag this time, although I *am* quite proud of my new one. It is plaid, in a most attractive shade of blue.

I shall walk across the steady, level floor to the sergeant and say, "My name is Miss Althea Brimston. I wish to confess to the murder of Judge Carlton Herrod."

He will not believe me, of course, but it does not matter. The scales are balanced.

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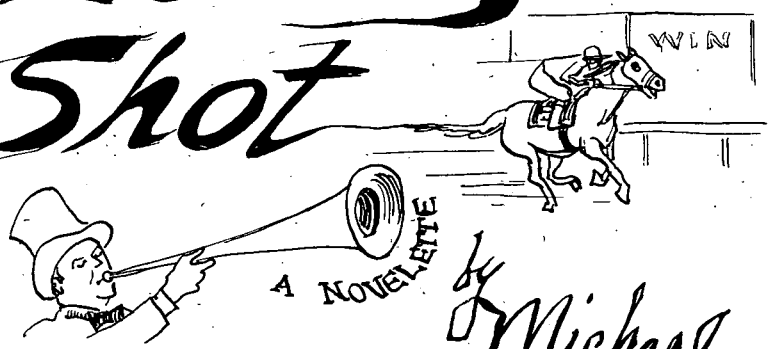
If man is patient, nature has its own way of taking care of the misfits.

Long Shot



A NOVELETTE by Michael Collins

AROUND THE Chelsea slums of New York they tell the story of an immigrant who came here with only the clothes on his back and a dream of opening his own restaurant. He knew that hard work and saving his money was the way to get his dream, so he worked day and night as a waiter, and after ten years he had $312.27 in the bank. He thought about it a while, then took the $312.27 to Belmont Park and put it on a 100-1 shot. The horse came in, and that's how the immigrant got his restaurant.

Frank Marno knew that story as well as anyone.

It was hot the day Frank came into my office. He was twenty-five, busy and eager. "You'll handle a job for me tonight, Dan?"

"What kind of job?" I asked. I'd known Frank Marno most of his life. His father had been Sal Marno—chair number two at Cas-

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sel's Barber Shop. Sal had left Frank that chair as his legacy, but Frank had other ideas.

"Same as usual," Frank said. "You deliver the package out to Kennedy International tonight. Negotiable bonds, so take your gun, okay? The client likes to see a gun."

Frank had no education beyond cutting hair, but he had imagination and energy. He started by picking up whatever he could sell for a profit. He hustled pool, gambled when he had a stake. He ran messages for bookies, and worked up to taking small bets. Then he got a franchise from the top men for his own book, started his legitimate messenger service, handled a few actions I didn't want to know about, and finally bought a share of a good liquor store. At twenty-five he was doing fine.

A long time ago, when Frank had been just a kid, his father, Sal Marno, had saved my life by hiding me out when some unpleasant types wanted me dead. Sal had stood up to the muscle and the cops, had taken more than one beating, but had not revealed where I was hiding. I got out of the country on a ship; the ones who were out to get me ended up dead themselves, and I hadn't forgotten what I owed Sal Marno.

When Frank started his messenger service he wasn't flush, and he knew the principle of holding down the overhead, so he kept his staff low. When he needed a bonded man, he hired me. I remembered Sal, and detective work in Chelsea doesn't make a man rich, so I took the work.

This time I picked up the package at Frank's store. That was unusual, as normally I got the package straight from the client. I didn't think much about it then, which shows how careless a man can be when dealing with friends. Frank himself gave me the package and the instructions.

"Get to the hangar at eight o'clock, Dan. Not before, the client says, and don't be late. Okay?"

"Pay me, and I fly," I said.

He paid me, and I went to eat some dinner. I had time for a few good Irish whiskeys with Joe Harris, and then I caught the airport bus from the East Side Terminal. Frank Marno didn't pay enough to waste my money on a taxi.

At the airport I got directions to the right hangar, and finally found it just two minutes before eight o'clock. I went in with my big cannon displayed to impress the client. There was a small private jet all warmed up in front of the hangar.

Two people waited inside the hangar. One was a really beautiful girl.

The other was Frank Marno.

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Frank had a gun in his pocket. He let me see it once. "Hand over the package, Dan."

I gave it to him. "Why, Frank?"

He grinned at me. "You mean why do it like this? I couldn't carry it around, Dan. Too dangerous. I had to cover myself."

"Cover what?"

"Why my delivery was late. I covered it okay, but it would've looked funny if I was carrying a big package. He might have wanted to know what was in it, or maybe why I took a package on a date."

"Who might have wanted to know?"

"Mr. Krupp," Frank said. "I had to pick up Angela, and make it look like just a regular date."

I wasn't following him all the way, but enough to have a cold feeling—cold and hard like ice. The girl came up then, and she was maybe nineteen. She held Frank's arm and looked up at him. Every man should have a woman look at him like that once in his life; with adoration, love, and a fierce kind of possession. Frank Marno was a lucky man. He was also insane; I recognized the girl now—Angela Krupp.

She smiled a defiant smile. "Hello, Mr. Fortune. Don't blame Frank, he couldn't tell you. You might—"

"I might have gone to your father," I said. "Maybe I would have. I like living."

Angela Krupp, the only daughter of Mr. Wally Krupp. The apple of Mr. Krupp's eye, guarded from the harsh world like a vestal virgin. She wasn't in an airport hangar with Frank Marno with the blessing of Wally Krupp. Never.

Krupp had been Krupanski once. I don't think Wally Krupp ever realized the symbolism of his changed name—he wasn't a man given to thinking much about symbolism. But Wally Krupp lived by the gun as much as his famous namesakes had—the gun, the numbers, the dope, and the terror. Second only to Andy Pappas himself in New York, he was polite to Pappas, but to no one else. Racket boss number two, and trying hard.

Frank Marno said, "You didn't know I've been working for Mr. Krupp for over a year now? My own operation in the liquor store? A big take, Dan, and I met Angela. Bingo! That was it for both of us, me and Angela."

"You and Angela and a jet plane, Frank?"

"We're in love, we got a right. I ain't losing her!"

Angela said, "My father hates all men who look at me."

I said, "You're married, Frank."

"To a tramp I dropped a year ago! I'll get a divorce down south,

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and if I can't, hell. We're in love. You got to grab in this world to get your share."

"What's in the package, Frank?" I asked.

His face was set. "You got to have money, too, Dan. That's what's in the package. One hundred thousand cash. A month's take. I worked it all out. We're going to live a good life."

I stared. "Krupp's money, too? You are crazy."

"My money!" Frank snarled. "I worked for it, I conned for it, I muscled for it. It's mine, and Angela's mine!"

When you're young, death is far away. The bigger the risk, the sweeter the triumph. Frank would be rich, and loved, and outlast the whole world.

I'm not young anymore. "Krupp'll get you, Frank."

"I can handle myself," he said, proud and tough. "I'll take care of Mr. Wally Krupp, and anyone he sends. I can shoot, I know judo, I fly my own plane, and I'm smarter than any illiterate like Wally Krupp."

"One man you can beat, but there won't be only one. Remember all the hired hands who never held any tool except a gun."

"Maybe a year," Frank said, "and he'll quit looking. I got it planned. What's a lousy hundred grand to somebody named Wally Krupp?"

"He can't let you get away with it, not one of his own men double-crossing him. And there's Angela—no punk was ever going to touch his daughter. She was going to marry respectable; maybe a prince. You can't marry her even if he'd let you. He's a moral family man, Krupp is."

"If he won't quit, I'll get him. I mean it, Dan."

"You can't get him. He's invulnerable, and you know it. Behind his hired guns and shyster lawyers he can't be reached. He snaps his fingers, you die, and you can't fight back."

For that one instant I think I got to him. One glimpse of doubt in his eyes, maybe fear. Angela Krupp squeezed his arm.

He said, "I've got it planned good, Dan."

Then he was gone—with his package, his woman, and his gun. I didn't wait for the plane to take off. I didn't want to be around if Wally Krupp happened to show up. I didn't ever want to see Frank Marno again.

You don't always get what you want.

Six months passed. Word gets around in Chelsea; a private detective hears whispers he doesn't always want to hear.

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If it had been only money, Wally Krupp might not have looked so hard. Or if it had been only Angela. Money and daughter were too much—a slap in the face of Mr. Wally Krupp, and face and reputation are important to a racket boss. They were laughing at Krupp—silently. Only Frank Marno's blood would help.

I heard only bits and pieces, but they added to a story.

A blonde cried in her beer one night only two months after Frank had run. Her man had been shot in Vera Cruz; he had been one of Wally Krupp's gunmen.

An old woman asked the D.A. if he could help her son and another man who were in jail in Caracas. They, too, worked for Wally Krupp. Krupp wasn't helping them much now.

Lt. Marx from the precinct came around to ask if I knew why Rico Stein had been in Peru. I'd known Rico pretty well at one time. Rico had just fallen off a cliff near Cuzco; rumor said he had been hired recently by Wally Krupp.

Chelsea lowered the odds against Frank Marno. He was proving to have sharp teeth, it looked like, and maybe he would beat Wally Krupp after all. At least, maybe Krupp would give up. How many men could he lose before the troops rebelled? Frank could be the winner.

I knew better. Frank might be winning some skirmishes, but the pressure had to be taking a toll, the roses had to be all gone by now. Frank and Angela weren't getting much of the good life—they were running faster and faster, looking over their shoulders, jumping at shadows. They were sleeping with crushed newspaper on the floor and the windows locked, no matter how hot it was where they were.

I knew the law of averages.

The averages ran out for Frank and Angela in a place called Rio Arriba down in Central America. Captain Roy from the D.A.'s squad told me. The D.A. was interested.

"Two of Krupp's best men caught them in Rio Arriba," Roy said. "One of the gunmen ended in the bay, the other's in jail down there on a murder charge. Frank Marno got away, Angela Krupp didn't. They found her in the bay, too."

It was a cold day, but not as cold as Wally Krupp's heart. His Angela was dead, killed by Frank Marno, of course. Wally Krupp wouldn't blame himself. No, he would tell himself that Frank Marno killed her by eloping with her, by stealing the money, by not protecting her.

"Krupp'll never quit now," I said to Captain Roy. "Not if it takes twenty years. Frank's a walking dead man."

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"He always was, Fortune. No one escapes Wally Krupp, not this side of the grave. The D.A. knows you talked to Marno that last day, and—"

"How do you know?"

"Don't panic, Krupp doesn't know. What the D.A. wants to know is how much Marno really liked the Krupp girl."

"I don't know, Captain. He's young. Who can say?"

"Enough to want Krupp dead? To want that bad?"

"Maybe."

"Enough to come back here to get Krupp?"

"No one can reach Wally Krupp."

Roy sighed. "I guess you're right, Fortune. The D.A.'s just kind of eager. Marno kills Krupp, and we're rid of Krupp. Krupp maybe kills Marno *here*, and we get Krupp."

"Or they kill each other," I said. "That'd be nice."

"Why not?" Captain Roy said, and left my office.

They brought Angela's body back. Krupp buried her in the biggest funeral Chelsea ever saw. I didn't go, but I got some of the news that came out of the funeral. Wally Krupp had the word out: no one was to touch Frank Marno. No one was even to bruise Frank—just find him, and report back to Krupp.

It figured; now Wally Krupp would handle Frank Marno personally. It had to be, when I thought about it. A family thing now, personal as well as business, a vendetta. Krupp would kill Frank with his own hands, if not tomorrow, then the next day—or next year.

Six more months went by. I was feeling better, until I got the letter from Frank Marno.

The letter was in a cheap envelope, with no date, no return address, and a New York postmark. Frank had given the note to someone to mail for him in New York, a note with his name scrawled, and just three words: *Find me, please!* So scared he couldn't risk telling even me where he was. Trust no one. Even if he trusted me, Krupp could be watching me by now, and Krupp could get to anyone.

Find me, please!

How long ago had the letter been written? Maybe months. What did Frank want—someone to hold his hand? Was his nerve gone now that he was alone, without Angela, the real reason he'd crossed Krupp in the first place?

What could I do for Frank? What could anyone do, even if I could find him?

Nothing—but that didn't matter. I owed Sal Marno's son, as I always had, and in Chelsea word gets around when you owe and don't pay. No, I had to go, if I wanted to

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live and work further in Chelsea.

Rio Arriba was a typical small Latin-American capital city with wide streets, marble government buildings on scrubbed green squares, the shacks of the poor hanging on muddy hillsides.

The Ministry of Justice was a skyscraper with a lot of statues. I asked for Captain Guzman—that much the New York D.A. had told me—the name of the officer who had handled the shooting.

Captain Guzman was a tall, *hidalgo* type in a military uniform complete with medals and polished boots. "Señor Fortune," he said, bowing me to a chair. "You wish to speak of the Angela Krupp murder?"

"I'm looking for Frank Marno, Captain."

Guzman nodded. "A tragic young man. Foolish, I think, but strong also. The señorita was most beautiful. His grief was great, but he was a man, a *caballero*, si? I watch, I see he has a stone in him—he will exact retribution."

"Do you know where he is?"

Guzman shook his head. "We investigated closely, of course, but it was clear that the two *pistoleros* had come to kill Marno and Miss Krupp. The weapons were lost in the bay, but the surviving *pistolero* confessed all to us. Marno acted in self-defense, and we released him. Where he went, I do not know."

"Can you tell me where he lived at the time?"

"Of course."

Five minutes later I walked out with Frank Marno's address, where he had lived after his release over six months ago. It wasn't encouraging: The Hotel San Martin.

The clerk was polite. "No, señor, he left us soon after the tragedy. Alas, I should have known that there was trouble—the señorita was so silent, so afraid, yes. The assassins actually came here!"

"It happened near the hotel?"

"Oh, no. In the slums, at the docks. So terrible."

"He left no forwarding address?"

"No, señor."

Stupid question. Frank wouldn't leave an address.

"I'll take a room," I said. I slipped him a twenty. "Pass it around that I'll pay for any information."

I waited around the hotel for three days. No one came near me, so I went out to try the usual routine.

A man must eat, sleep, have some fun. He can change almost everything except his habits. He can even try to change those, but he has to do *something* with the days and hours, and sooner or later he will slip. If you can look deep enough,

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he'll eventually give himself away.

I had a photograph. I tried the movie houses, theaters, jai alai fronton, racetrack, restaurants and bars. Everywhere I passed out word that I would pay. I drew a blank. There were bartenders and waiters who recognized Frank's picture, but they hadn't seen him for months. It looked hopeless, until one waiter remembered one small incident.

"Si, they sit in my corner many days," the waiter said. "The pretty señorita is very unhappy, the man he is angry."

"You never saw him alone later?"

"I think two, three times. He talks with Carmen."

I found Carmen at the bar of another cafe later that night; she was alone, drinking tequila. She shrugged at my question.

"I see many Americano men."

"I'll pay for information about this one."

"What information, hombre?"

"About where I can find him. He needs help."

I showed Carmen the letter; she blinked at it. She looked at me for a time, carefully. "Buy me a whisky. Scotch."

I bought her a Scotch. She drank with a deep sigh.

"Sometimes, I dream of the Scotch whisky," she said. She drank again. "This Marno was a sad man; he had lost his woman. He did not talk much. He say sometimes he don't feel so good; he say he will not long be alone."

"You know where he is now?"

"You are his friend?"

"Maybe the only friend he has."

I signaled for another Scotch. She stared at it when it came. She drank.

"The last time I am with Marno, he take me to where he live. I show you."

We went through the back streets of the city far from the wide boulevards and scrubbed public squares. The place she brought me to was a cheap, dirty rooming house. Frank Marno had not been there for many months. The manageress didn't know where he had gone, and she didn't care.

"He is drunk, always alone. Who can care?" she said.

As I started to leave, an enormous fat man came out of the manager's rooms. "Hey, Yanqui! Come with me."

The manageress turned on the fat man, spat something in gutter Spanish. The fat man grew red, and snarled at her. She shrank from his anger, walked away.

He nodded to me. "Come inside."

His eyes were sunk in layers of flesh—cunning eyes that were counting my money through my

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clothes and wallet. He sat down inside the filthy back room. He grinned at me. "You wear fine suit. You are a rich man?"

"No," I said, "but I'll pay to find Frank Marno."

"Of course you will pay. But how much, eh?"

"Fifty dollars."

He sighed, and the whole great mound of his body shook. I could smell the greed. Men like him are what make it so hard for another man to vanish.

"Señor Marno is generous," he said. "He pay more so I not tell where he go. How can I tell for so little?"

"You're a man of principle," I said.

He shrugged. "A man must live. I sell him to you, but I will not sell cheap, si? I am honest man."

"Like a saint. How much?"

"Five hundred American."

"Good-bye. I like a man to stay honest."

"Four hundred."

"I'll find him some other way."

Under the rolling layers of fat his muscles tensed. His reaction was a surprise, he was anxious, nervous. "Two-hundred-fifty, si?"

"One-fifty. Final offer."

"Okay, okay. You are hard man. Pay me."

"Tell me," I said.

He mopped his face. "I do not know where Señor Marno is now, but I know how you find him. Before he leave he go many days to hospital—they will know where he is."

"The hospital?"

"The big hospital for the rich, and the Americano."

I paid him.

The hospital was large, modern, and in the best section of Rio Arriba. The nurse at the night desk said that Frank Marno had been a patient of Dr. Paul Kolcheck, the senior resident. I found Kolcheck in his office, a thin, mousy man who looked self-important and hungry.

"Frank Marno? Why, yes, I remember him well. A tourist from Chicago. Nothing serious; stomach trouble, but it was mostly nerves."

Nerves I could believe for Frank Marno. "Where can I find him now?"

"I have no idea."

"Can I look at his chart? It might have an address."

"No, you . . ." His voice rose sharply; he tried to calm it again. "I'm sorry, but his chart was lost."

"Lost?" I watched his face.

"Yes, in a fire. We had a small fire here."

There was a wariness all over him now. I wondered if he happened to be a plastic surgeon, a little side practice? It was something Frank Marno would have

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considered very fully, I was sure.

I said, "He made many trips here, Doc, I know. You're sure it was nothing serious? You don't know where he went?"

"Quite sure on both counts. Now, if you'll excuse me."

I left on the cue, but I didn't go far. I hid where I could watch Kolcheck's office door. When he came out, he looked around, then hurried along the corridor without looking back. I followed him straight to the Record Room.

When he came out of the Record Room he had a manila folder. I tailed him to the living quarters. He hurried into a room, and came out again empty-handed. I ducked into a room to let him pass, then headed for my hotel to get my picklock.

Back at the hospital I didn't go in the front way. I slipped along corridors to the room in the living quarters. When I was sure I was alone, and that the room was empty, I picked the lock.

It took me five minutes to find the manila folder, and read it. It was Frank Marno's chart, and I knew why he had wanted a friend, and where to look for him next.

In the morning I took the noon train for the fishing resort of Lake Anacapa up the coast. An ancient taxi took me to the hospital. There they said they had never heard of Frank Marno. I told them about Frank's chart. "It lists letters between the Rio Arriba hospital, and the hospital here—letters from Dr. Jesus Rosas, Chief."

"Rosas?" the administrator of the Lake Anacapa hospital said. "An American would never go to Rosas' hospital."

"There's another hospital here?"

He nodded. "For the natives; a pesthole that's been here a hundred years. Rosas is half veterinarian. A crime, really, but the peons trust him. He's head doctor there, and the only licensed doctor. No American in his right mind would—"

I didn't wait to hear more. Frank Marno was in his right mind, and it was just where he would go. He had—three times within the last three months.

Dr. Rosas shook his head sadly. "What can one do? Such a case I see only once before. The last time he stayed here two weeks, then I sent him home. I do not expect him back again, señor."

"Where is home?"

"Santa Ynez. It is inland near the desert and the Sierra Negra. Some go to hunt; there is nothing else there."

"How do I get there?"

Dr. Rosas shrugged. "A car. It takes many hours."

Santa Ynez was a dusty misery of a village, a ruin before it began, and never known enough to have been

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forgotten. A few hundred Indians, two cantinas, one hotel for hunters, and the desert vast and empty to the distant mountains of the Sierra Negra.

As I drove into the silent town, the only signs of life were the vultures riding thermals above the scorching red hills of the desert. The police consisted of a *jefe* and two cartridge-draped Indians. They recognized the picture of Señor Marno.

"I think yes," the chief said. "He is much different."

"Where do I find him?"

The chief consulted the stars. "He lives here, there. You must look in the cantinas, si?"

I didn't find Frank Marno in either cantina. There was nowhere else to look until morning. I took a room at the one hotel, and, after staring at the bed, decided to sleep on the floor. I'm as antiseptic as the next American.

In the morning I looked into the hotel cantina and found Frank Marno. He was alone at a table. The sun wasn't above the huts yet, but he had a bottle of mescal.

I sat down. "Hello, Frank."

He didn't smile or frown, just reached for the mescal. I stared at the changes in him. The assurance was gone; the eagerness, the youth—and fifty pounds. His dull eyes were sunk into an emaciated face. His ragged clothes were filthy, his hands shook, and he looked sixty.

His voice was a croak. "Six months, Dan, nothing to do except sit in the dust. After Angela, and the—"

I knew what he had been going to say—after the hospital—but he stopped, drank, and looked out the open cantina door at the wall of heat that hung over the dusty street.

"Angela's dead, did you know?" he said. "I'm alone in this hole. I—" He looked at me from his wasted face. "I'm scared, Dan. Booze and pills; pills and booze. I don't want to die, but Krupp—you can't beat Krupp."

I said, "I read the hospital report in Rio Arriba, Frank."

"You read it? Kolcheck promised he wouldn't show it to—"

"I know how to find things, Frank."

He nodded slowly. "You know, what gets you here is the sameness. Not even a cloud, just those vultures. They're waiting, like me. Only they're waiting *for* me, right? Just me. Everyone else here was born dead."

"How long, Frank? A year? You've got a year, maybe?"

For a moment he didn't seem to hear me, then he looked straight at my face. "Go away, Dan. I'm

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dead. Can't you see that now?"

"You sent for me."

He drank a long drink. "That was a long time ago. Angela was just . . . Go back, Dan, I was wrong. Go home."

"I came too far, Frank."

He drank again, and began to giggle. "To help a corpse, yeah. A corpse, Dan, one way or the other! A laugh!" He giggled, drank, and collapsed on the table. It wasn't even ten o'clock yet.

The bartender came to the table "He do it all the time now," he said in careful English. "Very fast. Sick. I take him to room. I am Ortega, his friend."

Ortega picked Frank up like a feather and carried him out. I followed to a windowless hovel where Ortega laid Frank on a pile of rags. He lay as if already dead, and I went out to walk in the sun and dust. Indians watched me from a distance.

Frank woke up in three hours. It began again: the cantinas, the mescal, the babbling talk, the telling me to go home, until he passed out once more.

On the third day I sobered him enough to make him shave, and find the one suit he had worn when he arrived at Santa Ynez. I told him I had a car, and the train left from Lake Anacapa. Then I lost him again. He screamed I was fingering him for Wally Krupp. He grabbed the bottle, and ended in a stupor by dark.

After a week I had him sober for almost a day—sober, silent and nervous. He had agreed at least to go back to Rio Arriba. We were settling it in the hotel cantina, with Ortega hiding the mescal bottle, when I heard the car, a big car out in the late afternoon dust and heat.

Frank Marno heard it, too. The only car in Santa Ynez was the chief's land-rover. This wasn't a land-rover. Frank's head jerked up, sober, to look fearfully at Ortega. The bartender hurried toward the rear door.

A man in a dark city suit came in through the rear door. He only glanced at Ortega hurrying out. It was a hundred in the shade, but the newcomer wore his suit buttoned, and his tie knotted. He just stood there, empty-faced.

Wally Krupp came in the front way.

Krupp's fleshy face sweated in rivers, not used to such heat. His eyes were cool. Two more dark-suits followed him in and stood where they could see the whole room. Krupp sat down at a separate table.

"You're a long way from home, Fortune," he said.

I felt a little sick. He wasn't surprised to see me. He knew I'd be

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here. I'd led him to Frank Marno!

Now he looked at Frank and said, "Hello, Frankie."

"What took you so long?" Frank Marno said in that croak.

Krupp nodded. "You always were smart, Frankie. You could have gone a long way with me. Too bad."

"Go to hell, Krupp," Frank said, his voice all at once a lot stronger. "I took your money and your daughter; she wanted me, not a prince. My woman, you hear? You killed her."

Krupp's face darkened. "I know what killed her, punk."

"Do you?" Frank said. "What does it matter? If she couldn't have me, she wanted to be dead anyway. You came to kill me, get it over with, then."

Wally Krupp smiled at Frank Marno. "You want to die, Marno?" he said softly.

Frank's sunken eyes were dark. "Why not? You killed *my* Angela. The money's all gone. Why not?"

"Gone? A hundred grand in a year? Not here, Marno."

"I found ways to spend it. You get nothing—no money, no daughter. Go on and kill me. You're the loser."

"I get the fun of it, Marno," Krupp said.

"Not even that," Frank croaked. "Angela's dead, the money's gone, back home who cares? Kill me for nothing, Krupp."

I watched Frank Marno. Something had changed. He was goading Krupp, asking to be killed. Did he think he could trick Wally Krupp into letting him live by asking to die? A crazy hope to risk his life on—and mine. I had no illusions about my fate. I had to figure my own way out, if there were one.

"So," Krupp said, "you got it all figured out, punk."

I never saw his signal. One of the gunmen was behind me. I had no chance to reach for my gun; the gunman lifted it from me. The second gunman searched Frank Marno; Frank had no gun.

Wally Krupp stood up. "The car. Watch the local cops."

We went out into the wall of heat on the lone street of Santa Ynez. The chief lounged in the shade across the street, mildly interested in us. It was all unreal, as if we were playing a scene in a bad movie. The dusty village, the silent Indians, the comic opera chief in his cartridge belts . . .

"Krupp," I said. "Listen, I—"

"In the car, Fortune," he said. "You did me a service leading me here, but you shouldn't have tried to help Marno. Bad luck."

I got into the car, and it was then I got the hunch—a crazy hunch. Krupp had followed me here. How

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had he known to follow me? It had not been that hard to find Frank Marno, not really. A hunch—or was it only a straw to clutch at?

The big car was cool inside, and silent; air-conditioned and solid. We drove, and there was nothing to measure distance by in the desolate land—or time.

We drove along the one macadam road, then off across dirt roads through the low red hills. A thick cloud of red dust hung in the heat behind us. Beyond the dust rising, nothing moved in that desert, nothing existed. Finally we stopped.

"Out," Krupp said.

We were at the edge of a small box canyon among jagged sand hills. Our own dust cloud still hung in the air behind us; beyond it I saw only the empty desolation. Or—was there another dust cloud? Very close?

"Walk, Fortune," Krupp said.

We walked deeper into the box canyon, in silence. I listened, but I heard nothing beyond the steady crunch of our feet in the red sand. We walked for almost five minutes, the canyon curving deeper into the jagged hills, deserted and almost soundless.

"All right," Krupp said.

He had stopped behind us. We turned. His gunmen stood behind him, alert.

Krupp looked at Frank Marno. "You killed my Angela. Maybe you loved her, but you killed her. You got anything to tell me?"

"No," Frank croaked. His hands were shaking. "Go ahead and shoot. Go on!"

Krupp said, "Maybe I should stake you out, tie you down in the sun and let you die slow."

Frank licked his lips. "You'd never be sure."

"That's right. I have to shoot you to be sure."

"Yes," Frank croaked, then shouted, "Shoot me!"

His words echoed and bounced loud in the canyon. Krupp's smile was cruel.

Then I saw them, up on the rim of the canyon, not a hundred yards away, rifles in their hands: the chief and his two bandits. My wild hunch had been true!

"Krupp," I said, "it's a trap! He wants you to kill him." I told him about the hospital chart. "He's got maybe a year to live. The local cops are in the hills. You shoot us, they'll kill you, or take you. This is their country—you'd be helpless down here with a murder charge against you. He's dying already, Krupp! He wants to take you with him."

Frank cried, "He's crazy! Why would I—"

Krupp's laugh was cold, nasty, cruel. "I know all about it, Fortune," he said. He turned to Frank

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Marno. "Smart boy, the money's gone, and maybe a year you got to live. So you think you'll get even with Wally Krupp, take me with you. Why not? I'd do the same myself if I had the same reason and chance."

He looked up at the hills.

"You think you trap Wally Krupp so easy? That bartender at the cantina, I figured you sent him to the cops. I let him go so I could watch you sweat. I know what it means—Hodgkin's disease—you'll go slow and hard, right? Always cold, the book says, even down here. In the end you'll crawl in the dirt, too weak to walk. Look at you already! Why should I kill a dead man?"

His dark eyes glittered in the setting sun. He was enjoying the vision of how Frank Marno was going to die: cold and alone.

He said, "I'm going home, Frankie. I leave a man to watch, to keep you here. Try to leave, you die faster. When my man tells me you're dead, I'll give a party! Now you can walk back; maybe the walk helps you die faster." He walked away up the canyon, his gunmen followed. They hadn't said one word all the way; maybe they didn't know how.

When they were gone, Frank Marno's legs gave out. He slumped to the dust and began to cry.

Ten minutes later the chief picked us up. No one spoke all the way to Santa Ynez.

I packed in my hotel room, then went down to the cantina. For once, Frank wasn't there. I found him sitting on the floor of his hovel, his sunken eyes glittering.

"Just to make Krupp die too?" I said. "You sent me that note—and you sent another note to tip Krupp to follow me! You wanted me to lead Krupp to you, but you had to make it look hard."

"He wouldn't have fallen for it if it was easy."

"Get him here, trap him into murdering a dying man!"

"He killed Angela. I had to get him before—" He didn't finish. He didn't have to.

"A slim chance," I said. "A long shot all the way."

"I've played longer. Damn it, it should have worked. Doc Kolcheck was supposed to lead you here, but hide the chart."

"You knew I'd found out when I came."

"I tried to make you go."

"Because you wanted to save me?" I said. "No! You were just hoping Krupp hadn't found out about your disease, and you were afraid I would tell him."

He shrugged in that dismal room. I didn't matter.

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"I said, "You owe me expenses."

"The money's gone, Dan. You heard me tell it."

"Yeah," I said, "and you need what you have for mescal. You might live over a year."

I walked out. It was almost dark, but I didn't care about the dangers of driving in the dark through the desert. I had a drink in the cantina, got my car, heaved my bag in, and started out of the village. As I drove past Frank Marno's hovel, I saw the chief come out with a fat manila envelope; he whistled as he walked away. I didn't see Frank Marno.

I drove to Lake Anacapa. In the morning I took the train to Rio Arriba, and caught the first jet home. All I wanted to do now was forget about Frank Marno and his desperate long shot to "get" Wally Krupp. I tried hard, but I couldn't forget Frank.

Wally Krupp told the story, and in Chelsea they all buried Frank Marno—a dead man was empty space in a busy world. Not to me. I lay awake thinking about it for a whole month. I thought about how close Krupp had come to murdering a dying man; about the chief whistling coming out of that hovel; about almost a hundred thousand dollars spent in a year on the run; about Frank Marno waiting alone to die.

I took the jet back to Rio Arriba a month later. I went to Captain Guzman and told him the whole story, then I took a room in The Hotel San Martin to wait. I didn't think the wait would be too long.

Six weeks later, Captain Guzman called me. "Marno is dead; in the hospital in Lake Anacapa. The notice is in the newspapers. He will be buried in Lake Anacapa."

Guzman drove me up himself. They took Frank from the hospital to the pauper's cemetery in a ten-dollar pine coffin. The jefe of Santa Ynez came, Dr. Jesus Rosas, Guzman and I, a man who had to be Wally Krupp's watcher, and no one else.

"He did not want to live, took no care, drank too much, refused the medicine," Dr. Rosas said at the grave. "The end was quick, he did not suffer too much."

In the coffin, Frank Marno had shrunk to an old man. His sunken eyes were closed, his face the color of sand under the heavy makeup of the local embalmer. Dr. Rosas said a few words, and the coffin was closed and buried.

Captain Guzman left with the fawning chief of Santa Ynez. I hired another car and drove alone to Santa Ynez. Once more I arrived just at dusk.

I went to the hovel; it was dark, no one was there. A few pieces of

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Frank Marno's useless life, nothing more. I went back outside and crouched in the shadow of a low mud wall. I shivered as the night grew colder, but I never took my eyes off the shadowy hovel. It was a mistake.

He was behind me before I heard a sound, the gun against my back. "Turn around, sit down, hands on the ground."

I could see him by the starlight. He had a pale beard, blond hair, glasses, a large nose and wore a light tropical suit. He carried a leather bag, and his gun was aimed at me. I would never have known him.

"The money wasn't in the hut," I said.

"Safer out here," he said. "I watched the funeral. No one examined the body."

"On purpose, Frank, so as not to tip you we knew."

"How?" Frank Marno said from his new face. "How did you figure it, Dan? It had to be you, damn you!"

"I saw the chief leave your place with an envelope. He was whistling. I asked myself: what made the chief happy? A payoff? But you said you had no money, and why would you pay him if your scheme had failed? It made me wonder. I went on home, but a question stuck in my mind: how could you have thought Krupp wouldn't find the chart about your disease?"

I waited for an answer. He only watched me in the night.

"You knew Krupp, he couldn't have missed that chart," I went on. "Your plan wasn't to trap him into killing you, it was to make him *think* you were trapping him! You didn't have any fatal disease. The whole thing was fake, to make him come here, and go away leaving you alive! You played us all like fish—especially me. I was the convincer."

He smiled. "A good act, eh, Dan? I didn't eat much or sleep much for months, I never washed, and I watered the mescal. I looked dead even to you—I had to test it on you first."

"Good act," I said. "Krupp might have shot you anyway. It was a million-to-one shot."

"Sooner or later he would've gotten me if I kept running. One big risk to be rid of him was better," he said. "The odds weren't that bad. I know Krupp; it was a 'plan' he'd believe. All I had to do was make him dig it out, and add you for scenery to make it real. He believed because he'd have done it himself."

A long shot, sure, but played on knowledge. Frank had used Krupp's own cunning against him—Krupp's kind of trick.

The old confidence was back in

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Frank's voice. "Down here I can buy anything. Those people in Rio Arriba; Doc Kolcheck to fake the chart; Doc Rosas in Lake Anacapa; the chief; Ortega the barman to fake the drinking and dying; the undertaker to get a body and slip on a mask of my face. New papers, Dan, a new face, a new life—with fifty grand still left—I'm free of Krupp, rich, and no one hurt."

I said, "And Angela?"

"Angela? What about Angela?"

I said, "I made Guzman look closer at the case, Frank. He doesn't have the same gun, but he has the bullets. Angela, it seems, was shot with the same gun that killed Krupp's gunman that night. The gunman in jail says it wasn't one of their guns—wrong caliber. Is that the gun you've still got on me?"

"They can't prove anything now!"

"They're simple people," I said. "They won't believe your scheme. They'll ask themselves: *What better way for a killer to escape than by pretending to die?* They'll convict you."

His eyes were steel, the eyes of the boy who wouldn't settle for the barber shop where his father had lived and died.

"She turned on me, Dan. She was going back to Daddy! She said I didn't have a chance this side of the grave. That gave me the whole idea, but I couldn't do it if I let her go. She'd have known it was a fake. I guess we hated each other by then." He looked straight at me. "And I had to make Krupp hate me enough to come after me himself."

Kill Angela to make Krupp hate him enough. It worked.

He said, "Take half the money. I don't want to kill you."

"You won't. Guzman is watching the front of your hut; a shot brings him. Hit me, I'll yell. Where can you go?"

He shrugged. "The desert. The Sierra Negra."

"You couldn't make it. No chance."

"There's always a chance," he said.

"The long shot again?"

Another shrug. "When you're born poor in a rich world, all you've got are long shots. Give me a half hour, Dan?"

"No."

He nodded. "You know, I'm sorry about Angela, I mean that. I pulled it all to have her. Kids in love. It didn't work, Dan, pressure changes people. She got to hate me, and I had to stay alive any way I could. That changes a man, too—the thinking of nothing except staying alive. You change."

I said nothing. What was there to say?

He went on, "Maybe Krupp

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really did kill her. If he'd let us go, who knows? We started in love, but he didn't let us go, and we broke, and I pulled the trigger. It happened like that. Who knows how it would've been if it had happened some other way?"

He was gone, fast and silent in the cold night. I didn't move. Simple caution. I heard a car engine start out in the desert. I was safe, but I still didn't move. Why?

Maybe because some of what he said was true—he had done it all, but not alone. Others had a share of the guilt, even Angela herself in a way, and even the world that had taught Frank Marno how to survive.

Or maybe because he'd lived his short life on the illusion of long shots. He had no chance in that desert, but he'd try. Maybe I wanted him to have that much to the end—the hope that the long shot would come in.

I waited half an hour, then I went and told Guzman.

He nodded. "We will look tomorrow. No hurry, Señor Fortune. Out there is only heat, empty mountains, no water, hungry Indians and animals. His car will not go far, and no man has ever reached our border on foot."

They found the car, but not Frank. Guzman blocked all roads and sealed the borders, just in case. He rounded up the bribe-takers. After two weeks I went home.

It was two years before I got the letter from Captain Guzman. They had found Frank Marno's bones—in the mountains, not in the desert. The money was beside the bones.

Captain Guzman was impressed that an American had gotten so far alone.

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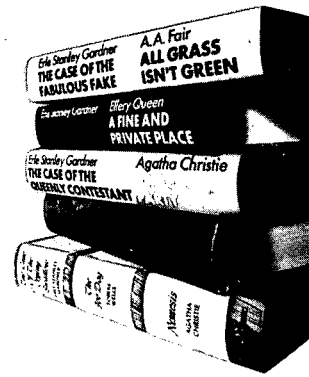

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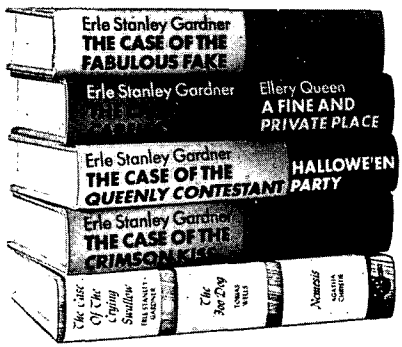

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